



IZUSHIRO
ILLUST RURIA MIYUKI

THE GREATST
MAGICMASTER'S

RETIRED
PLAN

15



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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

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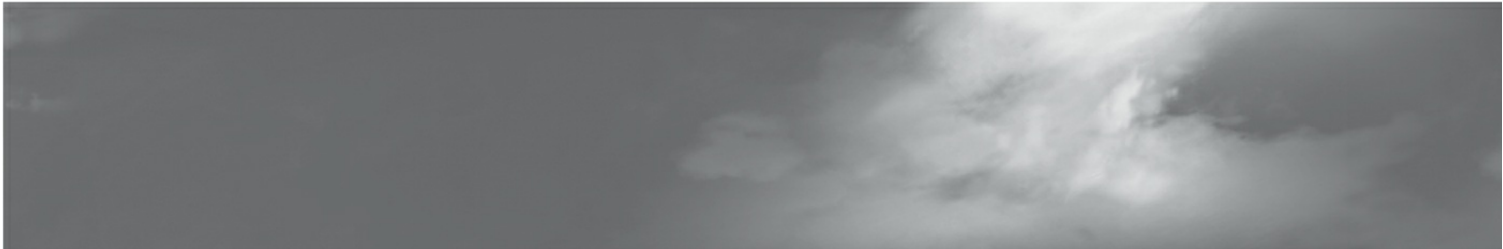


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Eighty-Fourth Chapter

A Chance Encounter between the Shrewd

Felinella Socalent stood near the border between Alpha and Clevideet, wearing a blatantly bright smile. If one tried to interpret it, they would believe she was either in a great mood...or was incredibly angry. Regardless of which it was, her smile was too flawless to read. It was the mask of a perfect lady.

At any rate, she had managed to avoid a major conflict between Alpha and Clevideet by a hair's breadth. Alpha's rank 1, Alus Reigin, and neighboring country's rank 4, Fanon Trooper, had encountered each other by chance, causing a political incident of great sensitivity.

If she'd been a few fractions of a second later, Alus would have cast his spell, making that potential nightmare a reality. It wasn't a matter of who was right or wrong—two Singles had met and clashed. Felinella's arrival had prevented the greatest incident of the century from happening.

Felinella was the only person present who was acquainted with both Alus and Fanon, so she had to act as an intermediary between them. Her strong presence was a blessing—she was the only one who could handle the two twisted Singles before her.

The sight of Felinella guiding the groups to an old private house was bizarre. It looked strange even to Loki, who was quietly following behind Alus. After all, a bunch of hooded figures were walking into a house that looked abandoned.

Anyone unaware of the situation would assume that some heretical ritual would be taking place. And in a sense, that wasn't entirely wrong. The meeting that was about to take place would be chaotic.

The inside of the old building was as dusty as expected, but there were signs that it had seen use by several people not too long ago.

"Let me start up the fireplace," said Felinella, taking initiative to put firewood

in the fireplace.

The female members of Fanon's squad tried to help by grabbing used paper and dry straw from the dirt floor. Finally, Felinella flicked her finger, creating a small spark that fell into the fireplace. It was a form of everyday magic that even non-Magicmasters could use.

The paper and straw burned, engulfing the firewood in flames, and before long there was a relaxing, natural warmth in the room.

Alus and Fanon took their seats around a bare table. Loki remained standing behind Alus, and Fanon's subordinates lined up beside their captain with blank expressions. Both sides ended up just staring awkwardly at each other.

Of course, that was only natural, since they'd been trying to kill each other just a short while ago. It wouldn't have been strange for anyone to have been seriously hurt or killed.

But before long, the woman who had brought them there broke the heavy silence. "Why don't we have a liiiittle talk while the water is boiling? First up are our visitors from Clevideet."

Felinella was seated on the side of the table between the two, but her choice of words made it sound like she was blaming Fanon and her squad for violating their territory. Felinella's face was obscured by the shadows cast by the fireplace, but it was clear that she was forcing a smile.

Fanon, Exceles, and the rest from Clevideet quietly turned their faces away when exposed to Felinella's silent anger.

"Ms. Exceles? Aren't you happy that it didn't turn out to be a big deal?" Felinella asked.

"Y-Yes..." In response to the strangely overpowering presence, Exceles shrank back and replied with a raised voice.

Despite being a student in Alpha, Felinella appeared to have a higher standing than anyone in the Fanon squad. Meanwhile, Alus looked at Felinella with a blank expression as he crossed his legs.

Felinella continued by speaking to him. "Sir Alus, I have been ordered by my

father to mediate between Alpha and Lady Fanon's squad from Clevideet, who are here unofficially."

Felinella smiled softly at Alus. After that brief explanation, she paused before continuing.

"Or rather...I was supposed to. Even though I was supposed to attend to them, they gave me the slip without saying anything," Felinella said, feigning calm.

"That is just a misunderstanding, Ms. Felinella!" one of Fanon's subordinates objected. It was the one who had aimed for Loki only to get beaten back.

"A misunderstanding?" Felinella replied sharply. "Not only did you disrespect the kind proposal of my father, Lord Vizaist Socalent, your actions put the relations between our nations at risk! What is there to misunderstand?"

Not even Loki had seen so much of Felinella's quiet anger before. The anger wasn't showing outright, but being able to sense her hidden fury made it more frightening.

In this atmosphere, it was hard to get a word in. Fanon was paying no attention to what Felinella was saying anyways, as if it had nothing to do with her. Her eyes were turned towards Alus. But she wasn't looking directly into his eyes but rather at his entire upper body... She didn't seem to be appraising him, but it wasn't exactly very friendly.

Suddenly, Fanon's lips moved as she spoke. "Could you shut up for a moment?"

The sudden rude remark made Felinella's eyes open wide. But Fanon didn't so much as look over; her eyes remained on Alus. While not quite friendly, she was showing interest.

"You. You can use some interesting magic that not even I can expect or analyze. When did Alpha's Magicmasters and the magic they use start to defy common sense?" Fanon asked in a challenging tone.

Before Alus could answer, Felinella interjected. "Lady Fanon, I cannot overlook that attitude! If you have no intention of changing your mind, then we may have to reconsider our stance of cooperating with you."

However, Fanon completely ignored Felinella. It was a rather fitting attitude as a Single Digit Magicmaster. If even Alus were to raise an eyebrow at her arrogant attitude, the old house would soon contain an atmosphere no different from the front lines of a battlefield.

“You heard what Felinella said. If you’re not going to answer her, I have no obligation to answer your question either,” said Alus. As long as Fanon and her squad’s true intentions were unclear, Alus wasn’t going to act rash, but he decided to press the point.

Unexpectedly, Fanon cut out her unsociable attitude and directed a smile towards Felinella. “Fine. So you were talking about us leaving you behind, Ms. Felinella?”

“Y-Yes.” The suddenness of the bright smile took Felinella off guard, and she gave a quick reply and smile.

“Well, we were rather careless about that... In the middle of our pursuit, they used magic to jam us. In the midst of the chaos, we had no choice but to make the fastest and best choice we could to pursue our targets. In the process, you lost sight of us,” said Fanon.

“That’s sophistry! Are you sure you don’t mean to say that you shook me off?! You are already ignorant of Alpha as is, so if you were to make a mistake, this time it could...” Felinella said emotionally, a rare blunder for her. But since it concerned Alus, she was unable to stay calm.

Exceles answered in a dispirited voice. “Y-Yes...so we are truly grateful to you, Ms. Felinella. The incident could have led to an irreparable rift between our nations.”

Even so, Fanon seemed determined to treat the brief fight with Alus as a freak accident. While Exceles was acting meek, it wasn’t hard to imagine that she had the same goal.

Alus was aware of their intentions. These were certainly the collaborators from Clevideet that Berwick had mentioned, but it still left things unanswered...

Alus had met Fanon once before at the ruler’s conference, so he knew her face. The question was why she was chasing criminals instead of Fiends, and

into Alpha at that. While Alus may have taken part in assassinations before, he'd never heard rumors of other Singles doing the same.

Besides...her fighting style is meant to be used against Fiends. A proper Magicmaster through and through. I can only see her as someone who isn't used to fighting against people, he thought.

Fanon's Juggernaut spell had been powerful, yes, but it was inefficient to use something like that against a mere human. It wasn't like Fanon had expected to run into Alpha's rank 1 so quickly, but Alus wanted more information so he could see the whole picture.

With that in mind, he signaled the troubled Felinella with his eyes, and when she came up to him, he whispered so only she could hear. "Feli, emergency situation or not, would another nation's Magicmasters offer to help for free? And a Single at that?"

Felinella whispered back, "Yes, it is probably related to the two believed to be involved in the escape from the Trojan Prison who came here from Clevideet. I heard they attacked Lady Fanon and her squad in a city. It's not something to speak openly about, but I heard about it when my father negotiated with them..."

"I see," Alus answered.

That made sense, and he finally started to get a grasp of Vizaist's goal. He only needed a few more tidbits from Felinella, and he was finally able to understand the situation. Berwick didn't think Alus would meet up with the cooperators from Clevideet—he'd been proven wrong right off the bat.

But perhaps that was for the best for Alpha. At the very least, he had more information to allow him to help Felinella, and he'd gained from Felinella's whispers a better idea of the information that Vizaist had been unable to obtain.

There had been an attack on Fanon in Clevideet. The ones behind it were the warden and vice-warden of the Trojan prison, Gordon and Suzar, and both men had entered Alpha after that attack.

Well, if Lord Vizaist knew that it was someone dangerous, he thought, *he*

wouldn't have left it to Feli, who has little practical experience. Besides, Fanon's side is still hiding something. It's hard to believe that they are helping just to catch those guys. There's probably another reason they're so adamant about those two. Something neither Feli nor Lord Vizaist has managed to figure out. Well, I imagine Lord Vizaist attached Feli because something bothered him. And associating with another nation's Single would make for good experience. That kind of affection is just like Lord Vizaist...

Incidentally, Alus was spot-on with his assumption. Vizaist probably didn't have a full grasp of why Fanon was so persistent about the attackers. But logically and emotionally, the motives for Clevideet's priority to capture their two men were all there, so he hadn't pried too deeply into it.

This is Lord Vizaist we're talking about, after all, thought Alus. I bet he has his own agents watching them anyways. Just getting a glimpse of another nation's Single's powers is worth enough on its own.

Alus knew how cunning Vizaist was, and with that, he broke his reverie. Under such circumstances, helping out a little couldn't be all that bad. But Fanon's arrogant attitude was intolerable, and frankly, having her act all big in his country didn't sit right with him.

Normally, leaving things to Felinella wasn't a bad idea because she was so eloquent, but she was at a disadvantage against a Single. Talented as she was, with the other party maintaining that the conflict was an unavoidable accident, she wouldn't be able to fully push her way through. And that made it difficult for Alpha to end up in a place where Clevideet would owe them a favor in the future.

With that consideration, Alus spoke up. "By the way, why did the attackers you are chasing choose to target you in Clevideet?"

Exceles, who was standing behind Fanon, answered the simple question. "That's... In short, we believe it was due to a personal grudge against Lady Fanon."

From what Alus could tell, Exceles Lilyusem was not one to exaggerate. She was a spotter who exceeded Alpha's Eye, Rinne Kimmel. But at the same time, she gave off the impression of being someone who pulled strings behind the

scenes like Rinne.

Both Alus's question and Exceles's answer made Fanon furrow her brow and twitch her cheeks. Noticing her attitude from the corner of his eye, Alus continued, "I see. Speaking of, we were pursuing someone suspicious just before coming into contact with you. He was using a gun-type AWR. So was it perhaps one of the ones who attacked you?"

Despite Alus's sharp stare, Exceles remained calm. "Who could say? Could you say anything about their appearance?"

"It was too far to tell."

Hearing that, Exceles gave him a vague answer. "I see. Then it would be difficult to conclude if they are the same person..."

It was a perfectly proper answer. But Alus wasn't planning on dropping it there. He threw in little tricks such as a small smile.

"That reminds me..." he said, "Clevideet has been putting more effort into bringing back the motifs of firearms, haven't they? I heard tales of an interesting gun-type toy being made...a magic gun, wasn't it?"

"You are well informed, Sir Alus," Exceles said, her expression turning a little stiff.

During the campus festival, Alus's class had set up a shooting stall, which made use of magic gun toys from Clevideet.

"I like tinkering, you see. That toy wasn't the result of a design originally intended for an AWR being put to civilian use...was it?" he asked.

"Ha...ha ha."

Hearing Exceles's dry laugh, Alus was convinced his remark had been on point.

Fanon's expression turned visibly sour. High-ranking Magicmasters were involved in sensitive matters, so having a good poker face was practically a necessary skill, but from what he could see of Fanon's constantly changing expression, it seemed she was an exception.

Alus had clearly struck a sore spot for Clevideet.

When it came to gun-type AWRs, Alus could only think of Clevideet. If the escaped prisoners were using one, then considering the timing, it could only mean that it was a military secret.

Things start to make sense if I assume they sent a Single Digit Magicmaster after them. Then the other one must have stolen some sort of military secret as well, he thought.

Alus's roundabout questioning had started as a way of getting back at Fanon for her attitude. But as he'd expected, it seemed they did indeed have an ulterior motive.

Besides, practically nobody in the seven nations would have the idea of creating a gun-type AWR nowadays. There was a limit to the magic formula that could be engraved on bullets, and the shape of a gun wasn't well suited for close combat. But eccentrics existed everywhere, and with the development of magical industrial technology, it was possible to make an AWR out of even a frying pan as long as the materials were there.

Having hit the nail on the head, Alus raised his voice. "I have no intention of complaining about your mission. And everything will work out fine if we just do what we have to. However, don't you think not sharing everything will just cause needless trouble?"

Vizaist must have expected the worst-case scenario based on Felinella's mention of Fanon's squad being here unofficially. If it came to be a problem between nations, Alus could just claim he didn't know anything. Of course, that meant Alus would almost definitely have to take care of the trouble in secret. In that sense, it wouldn't hurt for them to explain their goals and objectives to one another.

"It seems you've talked things out with your top, but you're still hiding something. You're only going to get in the way of my job like that," said Alus.

Alus knew it was important to take into consideration that Lord Vizaist had accepted their request. The skills that the gun user Alus had encountered set him apart from the other magical criminals that Alus had fought. Former warden or not, working with the escaped prisoners with that kind of power made him a threat.

Vizaist must have judged that Fanon and her squad's aid would be necessary to bring the incident to a swift end. So now that he'd outwitted Fanon, it was time to let go of the earlier matter and reluctantly compromise with her.

That said, can she even be reasoned with? Alus thought.

Alus stared at the sturdy nation's Single Digit Magicmaster sitting opposite of him. She had her arms crossed and was fidgeting enough that her wisteria-colored hair swayed back and forth. She made no attempt to hide her bad mood. She certainly didn't seem willing to cooperate.

She wasn't even bothering to conceal her mana and had adopted a provoking stance. There was a dangerous light in her eyes, revealing an intense fighting spirit.

I guess she's not just a combat maniac. It's like she wants to change the rankings among Singles, thought Alus.

Alus looked at the cylinders placed between Fanon and Exceles as if to hide them. They were part of an AWR she had changed out during their battle as if it was her trump card.

AWRs used by Single Digit Magicmasters all had their own peculiarities. They were the best equipment available, presented to the Singles, representing the prestige of their nations.

Alus was interested in her AWR's performance, and as someone confident in his capabilities, it wasn't like he didn't have any desire to compete against her. In fact, after their encounter, he had a strong urge to see how far he could go against her using all of his might.

"Well, anyways..." he said with a sigh. "It just means that you have your own circumstances. If you're willing to cooperate then that's enough."

Alus shrugged. According to some information added by Felinella, Fanon's squad had been obstructed from pursuing Gordon and Suzar by Millimore Mazain. So in the end, the battle was a result of two sides being lured in.

"Well, I'm going to do it my own way. You can hunt down Gordon and Suzar if you get the chance. But this time try not to lose sight of them," said Alus.

Even though he'd said it sarcastically, Fanon made no attempt to rebuff him while making her own assertion.

"That's fine with us. We have a rank 1 of our own," she said with a childish sense of rivalry, looking proudly at Exceles behind her, who could only give her a troubled expression in return.

"Ah right, Ms. Exceles was the rank 1 Spotter. Which means that she surpasses even Alpha's own Rinne Kimmel," said Alus.

Alus had seen Rinne's abilities up close, so the thought of a spotter that exceeded her was very interesting. There was no way mere detection magic would exceed the Eye of Providence.

"Yes, I am acquainted with her," said Exceles. "However, detection is not directly related to combat, so the spotter ranks are just a matter of prestige and political games for the nations."

Exceles's calm answer didn't seem to be just out of modesty. She didn't feel there was much point in ranking spotters—probably because she could evaluate Rinne's powers. And she clearly wasn't trying to show off, which was proof that she could see the strategic values of Magicmasters and spotters in a fair and objective manner.

"That's true, a nation's prestige is a constant bother," said Alus.

Exceles could only reply to Alus's imprudent complaints with a smile. She certainly was capable; she was perfectly watching over her squad. And from the look of it, she was firmly holding Fanon's reins.

She was probably conveying orders from the top brass to Fanon while steering her in the right direction and scolding her for her indulgence when necessary. With that in mind, Alus realized that this beauty must have many hardships...

Perhaps spotters had to have skills aside from just detecting. When he thought about that, he realized it applied to him as well and straightened his back, thinking of the excellent partner behind him.

Realizing that his thoughts had gone off track, he returned to the topic at hand to poke at the main issue. "That aside, the reason you lost sight of them

was due to jamming. From what I could tell, it was a spell called Millimore Mazain. Do you have any countermeasures for that?”

Alus was convinced it was the gun user who had used the advanced magic jamming. The moment Alus asked that with clear seriousness, Fanon’s expression turned smug, and she bent her fingers towards Exceles.

Once the approval to disclose information came from the captain, Alus heard Exceles let out a deep sigh. “Yes, it will be fine. We were suspecting the same thing. They have slipped through detection twice already, but we already have a good grasp of the spell’s magical structure. And if that spell is indeed Millimore Mazain, then we’ll be more certain.”

“I can assure it. The outer shell structure might have been changed, but the core is still the same,” said Alus. “Still, if you have a way to overcome that, then I can only give you my respect.”

“Thank you very much. With your assurance, there are no more concerns.” Exceles gave her thanks in an honored manner.

Alus knowing the construct for Millimore Mazain also meant that he knew taboo and classified spells. It was an unspoken rule in the international community that not even Singles were allowed to touch such spells.

Of course, there were cases where the will of the nation took precedence over such arrangements, but if that were to come to light in the diplomatic arena, it would raise tensions between nations.

That was, of course, just on the surface. An ideal image of a peaceful world.

Alus going out of the way to give out that piece of information was his way of showing he was aware of the behind-the-scenes mission that Exceles and the others were hiding.

Incidentally, Exceles had some knowledge of magic as well. It wasn’t enough to show off, but she had at least drilled the list of the past taboo and classified spells into her head, as she was always preparing herself for any potential irregularities to be able to more efficiently analyze situations. But even if she recognized the structural elements, she didn’t have the knowledge to share with others.

So after thanking Alus, Exceles spoke up again. “That said...Sir Alus, how do you know that is Millimore Mazain?”

It was a probing question, but like Fanon, she had an interest in what kind of a person the Magicmaster who stood at the top was. While there were some exceptions, detailed information on Single Digit Magicmasters was typically blank; only the bare minimum of information was given out. Alpha’s rank 1, in particular.

As he was still young, Alpha kept all information on him hidden, so to Clevideet, he was practically a complete unknown.

Alus’s answer was curt. “I can tell by looking. The obstruction of mana bonding and the randomly appearing light of mana are very characteristic. Although I feel like it’s not so much a trait of the spell but rather the performance of the AWR.”

Despite knowing he was revealing valuable information, Alus spoke freely.

“Sir Alus, no more than that,” Loki said to admonish him, but Alus didn’t seem to mind.

“It’s not a big deal compared to this troublesome case. The nation’s informational superiority might be important, but worrying about appearances here will only slow down the resolution of this problem,” Alus said and turned to look at Exceles, who cast her eyes down in response.

As expected, there was something questionable about their motives, but the point was to eliminate the escaped prisoners as well as Gordon and Suzar as quickly as possible. It was clear that Alus wouldn’t be allowed to rest until that was achieved.

The clash before wasn’t all that bad, since it allowed him to get a glimpse of Fanon’s capabilities. He even felt like he’d gotten to see something interesting.

It wasn’t like he’d intentionally ingratiated himself, but he wondered how Fanon and the others saw his aloof attitude. As silence filled the room, the sound of wood popping in the fireplace could be heard.

Suddenly, Fanon furrowed her brow a little before letting out a sigh as if she’d resigned herself. “Body integrating-type AWR Barbaros and gun-type AWR

Caligula—not that it concerns you anymore.”

Felinella gulped at those words. All of the information released in small pieces had led to this. She hadn’t been able to understand why her father had given her the task of monitoring Fanon’s squad. But now Alus had unexpectedly hit at the heart of the mystery.

Those two AWRs had probably been stolen from Clevideet. So Fanon and her squad weren’t just after capturing Gordon and Suzar, they were also taking those back.

And that was why they’d more or less forced their way into Alpha.

But Fanon’s simple words had left Exceles and her other squad members flabbergasted...and clearly upset.

“Lady Fanon!” Exceles reproached her, but Fanon ignored her, looking only at Alus.

“If you’re interested, I could tell you everything I know about their mechanisms and the main functions of the engraved magic formulas. In return...” she said, but Alus raised his hand to stop her.

“No, that’s fine. It’s probably some national secret, right? Why would you tell me that?”

“Oh? You seemed logical but greedy when it comes to matters that concern you. Well, fine. It’s not often Singles come face-to-face like this. Now, let’s just agree not to get in each other’s way.” An insolent smile decorated Fanon’s face.

Tsk, so she’s just saying that she’s repaid the favor, now go no further. Does she think that’s going to fly? Well, I wasn’t going to pry too deeply anyways, and if she’s going to take on some of the trouble herself, that’s just convenient to me, thought Alus.

Kindness met with kindness. Alus hated a flow of conversation that insisted on such a rule. Concessions and bargaining might be important, but Alus wasn’t a fan of the sort of political dogfighting that required several layers of reading the room.

But it seemed the small woman before him was more shrewd than expected.

She seemed belligerent, but she'd offered such a deal the moment she saw an opening. She must have been used to coaxing the ruler or other big shots, giving off the impression of a small predator with a quick wit.

As he was thinking, Fanon directed an innocent smile at him. Among the people here, Alus was the only one officially affiliated with Alpha's military. Even if Felinella was a student in name only, she still wasn't a soldier. Being in a position of responsibility and authority, the term "Single" weighed heavily on him.

If anything, I'm more interested in those cylinders, he thought. Well, getting any more out of her might just end up restraining me.

Noticing him glancing over at them, Fanon gave him a quick "not those," blocking his line of sight with her hand.

"I bet," he said with a sigh. "Well, even if it was an accident, there were injured on your side. Got it. Then we agree not to interfere with each other."

"That's more like it, you get it," Fanon said with a toothy smile. Strangely enough, it even felt charming.

Alus resigned himself and dropped his shoulders. The situation had been resolved by Alus relenting to Fanon. Fanon's negotiation technique of mixing hard and soft lines had, as Alus had expected, repeatedly been used against the military's top brass to twist their arms. But it hadn't worked against Vizaist.

Exceles stood to the side, impressed by Fanon's art of coaxing, feeling like she'd seen her captain's dependable side for the first time in quite a while.

"Feli, that's how it's going to be," said Alus.

"I understand. I am only a student, so I will not say anything about your decision or the two AWRs for the time being," responded Felinella.

"Sorry about this," he said.

"Oh, it's only natural to prioritize practical advantages over appearance if necessary," Felinella said with a smile, showing her intent to respect Alus's decision. And even if she wasn't going to convey Fanon's objective to her father right away, they had still gotten valuable information.

“But I would like to point out to our guests from Clevideet that if you try to lose me again, I will take that as you going back on your promise,” warned Felinella.

Like Alus, Felinella would let previous transgressions go, but if it were to happen again, she wouldn't hesitate to contact her father. Vizaist would no doubt mobilize another force to eliminate Gordon and Suzar and seize their AWRs. That would be the best choice to prioritize Alpha's national gain.

Felinella pressed her point with a stern tone, and so it was Fanon's turn to drop her shoulders and accept it. After the AWRs were safely recovered by Clevideet, their names or functions being known to Alpha wouldn't matter all that much.

With their talks over, Alus suddenly recalled something he wanted to ask Felinella. “By the way, Feli, I still haven't gotten a call from Lord Vizaist.”

Hearing that, her eyes widened and she brought her glossy lips to his ear. “You mean that it wasn't my father's instructions that brought you here?!”

“No, it was a request from the Governor-General's side. What's going on? This has never happened on a mission before,” Alus whispered his answer back.

With a meek expression on her face, Felinella furrowed her brow and shook her head. “I don't know; my father wouldn't... But this time around, he seemed to be struggling with gathering information. I will try to contact him too, but it might be best to meet with him directly later.”

“Got it.”

And with that, they stopped their whispering.

“I still don't know why the gun user lured in me and Loki. Even if he was trying to lure us into trying to fight each other, it was a messy way of doing it,” he said.

Felinella nodded and answered. “The escaped prisoners' goal is still unknown... That might be the biggest problem.”

That was where Fanon interrupted them. “It's okay. If we find the time, we'll torture him and make him spit it out. Although it may be a little too intense for

our little student here.”

The prisoners in the Trojan Prison had, in effect, no nationality or even human rights. The laws wouldn't apply no matter what was done to them. But hearing threats like this didn't affect Felinella.

“Hmm, are you surprisingly used to violence?” Fanon asked with a fearless smile, and Felinella cast her eyes down.

“No, but if that's what it takes, the ends will justify the means,” said Felinella.

“I see. It really is a waste for you to still be a student.” Fanon was impressed and gave her a small smile.

“Then we'll be leaving. The gun user we were chasing up is your prey for the time being anyways,” said Alus.

The chair rattled as Alus stood up and turned away from Fanon and her squad. Even during this meeting, there had been no contact from Vizaist, which meant Alus still didn't know who his target was. It was strange for Vizaist to be so slow.

Some escaped prisoners had already been taken care of, but they were only the four who had attacked Alus. And he didn't know what their objectives were or where they had gotten information about him. Hiding your origin when doing dirty work was normal, and it wasn't like Alus's face was well-known in the underworld. But the escaped prisoners probably had their own network of contacts.

As he tried to walk away, his eyes met Loki's. She seemed to want to say something, but he didn't know what. At least it didn't seem to be complaints about him.

That was when Felinella began to talk. “Mr. Alus, I neglected to mention this, but I was thinking of returning to the Institute once today...”

Alus silently met her gaze. She'd shifted to referring to him as “Mr.” again, possibly to show she was worried about taking her eyes off Fanon and her squad for even a moment.

“Don't worry. When you return, tell Fia and Alice about this. We're still

waiting in vain in this situation, so it might take some time before everything is concluded. It might even take several days before we get back,” Alus replied.

It was only thanks to Alus’s presence as the rank 1 that when Felinella had pressed the point Fanon had offered them information about the AWRs to make a deal.

Exceles, who held the reins, suggested that things would be fine even without Felinella’s constant monitoring.

Exceles wore a gentle smile, most likely relieved for having gotten through with a troublesome negotiation, as she walked up to Alus and Felinella. “Please don’t worry, Sir Alus, Ms. Felinella. With the talks over, we will contact our nation and get ready for action. I believe we won’t move until tomorrow.”

“You heard her,” said Alus.

“I understand. Lady Exceles, thank you for your consideration.” Felinella bowed, and her beautiful black hair flowed down from her shoulders.

Exceles looked at Felinella with a sympathetic, wry smile, thinking about the hardships she must go through because of her outstanding talents.

“I see you go through a lot of difficulties yourself, Ms. Felinella. I believe I can understand your position. But now that it’s come to this, we are sharing one lot in a sense,” Exceles said and glanced at Fanon, as if to say that it was hard for both of them.

Felinella gave an understanding smile in response.

“All right, then this time we’re actually leaving...” said Alus.

As he put his hand on the doorknob, another sharp voice called out to them. “Hold up! There’s no need to be in such a rush,” said Fanon.

“Is there still something else?”

As Alus looked back in dismay, Fanon shot up from her seat, making her wisteria-colored hair sway. “Single Digit Magicmasters almost never meet, so you’re going to stay and make some small talk with me. Yes, the outside will be fine. It’s not like the nation will collapse if you’re here for a few more minutes.”

“Even if it doesn’t collapse, someone might die,” said Alus.

“That would be a shame,” said Fanon. “So you want to save as many as possible? Are you some hero working yourself to the bone?”

“To a degree,” answered Alus.

“I didn’t think you would be such a workaholic!”

With a sarcastic look of satisfaction, Fanon turned the doorknob that Alus had let go of and led the way out. Seeing how she was instructing her subordinates to stay behind with her eyes, it seemed to be an invitation through pure interest.

With a heavy sigh, Alus used his gaze to tell Loki to stay behind as well. Loki obediently nodded, and as Alus left through the door, he could see the female squad member Loki had fought earlier approaching.

Is this what that meaningful look meant? Alus thought.

Loki had been underestimated because of her small build and had counterattacked, but now that they’d reached a compromise, she also stepped forward to resolve any ill will. The edges of Alus’s lips curled up as he hoped for her regrets to be resolved.

Once outside, he could see that night had fallen. Daylight hours were shorter in this season to match the Outer Worlds, and day and night felt like it could switch in the blink of an eye. Perhaps nobody could even see the moment night came.

Even beneath the curtains of night and despite being alone with Fanon, Alus didn’t feel particularly nervous. He didn’t even feel wary. In fact, he also felt it was rare for Singles to find an occasion to speak between themselves without others around.

Thinking about it, the only Singles he could count among his acquaintances were Lettie and Jean Rumbulls. Then again, he never really felt a need to socialize, so he didn’t feel lonely.

Because of the season, it was a little cold too, but he didn’t use mana to mitigate it. The two continued walking until they reached a point where the light from the old house just barely reached them. Then Fanon stopped.

“You’ve been tinkering a lot with your spells’ constructions, haven’t you?” asked Fanon.

While her tone wasn’t exactly friendly, the hostility from before had completely disappeared.

As with the ruler’s conference, the relationship between Single Digit Magicmasters was inevitably tied to their ranking because rankings made them aware of the gap between their abilities whether they liked it or not. This kept them from being able to be friendly with each other or speak openly.

But while Alus and Jean were from different nations, they never cared about that, even if their ranks were to change. They had an invisible form of trust. But what about the Magicmaster before him?

“The answer to that can be expensive. It’s of similar value to the information on how you arrange and use your barrier magic,” said Alus.

Even to Alus, turning a defensive spell into something that could be used offensively was unconventional. So revealing the essence would require something of equal value in return.

“Aren’t you self-important, Alus Reigin? Well, what you’re keeping to yourself is certainly incomparable to any other Magicmasters. Exceles has noticed too. My adjutant is well versed in that area as well. I wonder what you’re hiding behind that unconcerned face of yours,” said Fanon.

Recently, Alus had been following the Governor-General’s commands and had refrained from using Gra Eater, but all spells Alus used received the benefit of being attribute-less. Because of that, they left any frame of reference, and manifested results that didn’t match the amount of mana used.

Barrier magic didn’t really fit in with the traditional attributes either, so in that sense they were similar to attribute-less, and perhaps Fanon had been able to pick something up because of that. Someone like Jean wouldn’t have noticed.

However, Alus would not question Fanon’s way of putting it. He figured she just wanted to confirm something she’d felt during their battle. Instead of waiting for an answer from Alus, Fanon leaned on the umbrella she’d brought

with her as a replacement for a walking stick.

“You don’t stink. Normally I’d pass on ever speaking with a man in such a cramped space. Do you not sweat or something?” Fanon asked.

“That wasn’t enough to work up a sweat,” Alus responded.

“Hmm, even after all of that? Well, that’s the rank 1 for you. It’s rare for me to be this interested in someone, you know. The first since Exceles, even,” Fanon said and looked Alus all over. “Your outfit is simple, and you’re not too mundane, I see,” Fanon mumbled and nodded to herself.

Single or not, Alus felt like his time was being wasted. “If you don’t have anything to talk about, then that’s enough.”

“Yes, not bad. That aside, to think you can talk to me like that. As expected of a Single. Even though you’re younger than me.” Fanon had been wearing a smile the entire time. “Anyone would have their doubts about the rank 1 being this young...but you certainly seem to hold power fit for a Single.”

“Hey!”

“Truly a chosen human, someone who has received a blessing from this world,” Fanon continued.

Alus’s eyebrows twitched. “Blessing? You mean an abomination.”

“That warped way of looking at it is fine. And then humans shun you, making it all the more comical,” Fanon said with a sarcastic smile as she began to walk around Alus. “As I heard, it doesn’t seem like you’ve sworn loyalty to Alpha or the military, nor have you sold your soul out of patriotism. Yet here you are helping with this mission... You are an odd little bird.”

“As if I would have anything to do with patriotism,” said Alus. “You’re not exactly very obedient either.”

Fanon didn’t answer, instead she moved behind Alus’s back and stretched up, standing on her toes. She brought her nose to Alus’s shoulder and sniffed him.

“I’m allowed to do whatever I want, so it’s fine. I’m free until I get tired of it,” Fanon said.

“Inside of an illusory small room, not knowing the real world? No matter

how much you chirp in your cage, you won't get a good meal. Although it may fill your stomach for the time being," said Alus.

"You say that like you're the only one who knows the truth. You're a kid." Fanon's tone suddenly changed. Acting her own age for once, her tone had the weight of an elder to it.

"It's not some fantasy. If you want freedom you can just flee as far as possible from your own nation, make some changes to your face, and disguise yourself. Just cut your hair and join the church, then as long as you keep your mana suppressed, nobody will find you," said Alus.

Of course, it wouldn't be that simple. Alus knew it would be no different from the life of an escaped prisoner lying low. If anything, it was a ridiculous answer to a ridiculous question. After all, it was only within the giant cage that was the seven nations that monsters by the name of Singles could be contained.

A sudden breath of air brushed the hair by Alus's ear.

"Hmph." Fanon backed away and answered in a tone that made it hard to tell if she was joking or being serious. "Then it's impossible. I couldn't stand cutting my own hair."

Fanon waited for his reaction with a flirtatious smile, and he answered with a cold stare.

"It seems I have taken up your time. But now I have a good story to tell," said Fanon eventually.



“Is that so?” Alus asked. “Then don’t mess up. Whoever your target is, make sure you finish them off, or it will only cause trouble for me later.” Alus’s tone naturally turned a little stiff as he considered the worst-case scenario.

“As neighboring nations, we’ll be pressured into it sooner or later. But I have my own position, and I will take care of my own matters. Try not to whine and throw out a stream of complaints later yourself. Goodbye then, Alus Reigin. I doubt we’ll meet again for a while. Oh, and one last thing... If we’d fought a little longer, you would have seen something interesting,” said Fanon.

“That AWR of yours, huh?” said Alus.

Instead of answering, she gave him a passionate stare before turning back to the old house. In the end, Alus wasn’t sure what it was that she wanted to say. Had this been a waste of time or a somewhat beneficial conversation? What had the past few minutes of discussion been for?

What this opportunity had changed was Alus’s impression of Fanon.

While they appeared the same age physically, they were different inside. Before reaching the rank of a Single, a Magicmaster experienced countless brushes with death; they would inevitably have an aura about them.

Alus recalled the fierce battle from before with Clevideet’s rank 4 Single, Fanon Trooper. She must have a screw loose to have gone so far in somebody else’s nation.

As exhaustion washed over him, he saw Loki and Felinella come out of the old house. They’d sensed that the night meeting between Singles had come to an end when Fanon returned.

“Mr. Alus, I believe my father is in the usual base. Please give him my regards,” said Felinella.

After nodding to Felinella, Alus and Loki began to move as two shadows running across the lands of Alpha, heading towards a place they’d visited several times in the past.

Eighty-Fifth Chapter

The Ill Omen Comes

To students, there was probably no other moment when they could experience this type of tension firsthand. This held true for regular schools and Magical Institutes. It was the day the latest exam results were posted.

While many students were seen looking gloomy and staring down with heavy hearts, others strode across the campus with their heads held high. It was a sight that made the losers and winners clear. However, it was but a moment, as eventually, inside the peaceful human domain, that gap would be blurred and shrouded by the veil of everyday life.

Apparently the same held true for the Second Magical Institute where novice Magicmasters spent their days learning. So it was no surprise to see the classroom filled with elites who would someday support their nation fretting over results was no different from a normal educational institution.

“This turned out just as expected,” said Tesfia.

“Yeah. There’s already cries calling it cheating,” replied Alice.

The girls whispered to each other as they listened to the various speculations of their sullen classmates. There were all kinds of opinions and attitudes, but the majority of the students were discontent and grumbling now that the results of the exams were suddenly made public.

Unlike graded regular exams, the midterm exam was rather light and featured no practical tests. So everyone had let their guards down. However, some of the students weren’t just unhappy about that.

“Still, didn’t Al say that he didn’t want to stand out? And now he’s in the top by far.”

Tesfia nodded at Alice’s question with a wry smile. “They’re just desperate, aren’t they? Well, it’s not like I can blame them for not believing it. Even if he

gets a pass on his tests, he might not get credit because of a lack of attendance. He's probably just getting back at the teachers, but he's contradicting himself. And because of that, my rank in the year dropped."

Incidentally, Tesfia was third and Alice was fourth, so they didn't have anything to cry about.

"Fia, there's a three-point difference," said Alice.

"Y-Yeah..." Tesfia turned her face away, trying to escape Alice's triumphant look.

The point difference between them was indeed minimal. In fact, Loki was second, and there was an almost fifty-point difference between them. So the two girls' competition seemed a bit pointless. With so little of a difference between them, luck no doubt played a part too.

"Maybe I'll beat you next time, Fia."

"Why do you have to make it sound like you've been holding back?"

"Taking the top would be difficult with Alus there. But aren't you forgetting something, Fia?" asked Alice.

"What?"

"I didn't get that high of a score on the last practical exam. But next time I will have Shangdi Fides and Sirislate."

"Ah, grr..." Tesfia grumbled.

Last time, Alice's score on the practical had been poor because she'd relied on basic arrow spells from other attributes. But this time she had a special AWR that Alus had made as well as a new spell she'd used during the Seven Nation's Friendship Magical Tournament.

On the practical part of their next exam, Alice would score a lot higher. With that, Tesfia would find herself overtaken if she didn't put in more effort.

The girl sitting on the seat in front of them turned back with a dark expression. "In the end, Alus was just getting serious. Besides, they'll only be talking about cheating for the moment."

The girl with chestnut-colored hair giving the two a languid glance was Tesfia and Alice's friend Ciel.

"It is now well-known that Alus is helping the military and that he's amazing. But Fia, Alice, you're both keeping your high ranking too. Just remember there are always people below you...like me..." said Ciel. Her normally cute eyes were clouded over, as if she'd caught some terrible disease. It was a deep-seated disease unique to students: the gloom of poor grades.

"You're awfully down today. You got a pretty good score yourself, Ciel. You don't have to be so bothered by it," said Tesfia.

"Aha ha ha... Is that how it looks?" With a dry laugh and a sigh, Ciel pointed at the virtual screen projected above the podium. The results of the students were being shown in a text so small in size that they'd need to squint to see it.

The two looked for Ciel's name in the tiny text. They started from the top, assuming that would be the fastest, but...for some reason they struggled to find it. When they neared the end of the list they finally found her.

"Huh?! You've dropped so much?" asked Tesfia.

"Yeah, that's not like you, Ciel. Did you struggle to study this time around?" Alice slowly asked, partially to console her. Ciel shook her head.

This puppylike classmate of theirs was, in their eyes, an earnest honors student. She put in proper effort and greedily absorbed knowledge. Since they got along well, she'd often ask Tesfia and Alice to explain anything she couldn't understand in class. And for them, teaching Ciel was a good way to review what they'd learned. They had a good relationship.

"No, I studied harder than usual, but my score was so low..." said Ciel.

"You must have made a mistake filling in the answers. The kind of panic when you do that is just..." Tesfia shuddered, remembering a past blunder.

"No, I'm not like you, Fia. In fact, I'm amazed you did that good." Ciel let out a deliberate sigh, pointing at the overall points lined up next to the ranking. "Look at the people below Alice. There's an almost one-hundred-point difference between fourth and fifth. That was just how hard the test was this time around, and even ignoring Alus and Loki, you two are far above the regular students."

“You think so?” It didn’t quite click for Alice, who tilted her head.

During their conversation, Tesfia had been staring at the virtual screen, wearing a smirk. She was typically never up to anything good when she wore that look.

“Fia? You shouldn’t make that kind of face when looking at people’s scores,” Ciel said with a frown.

But Tesfia turned to her and pointed at the screen. “Look. Look at that. See. Lilisha is ranked seven. Ha ha ha.” Lowbrow as it was, Tesfia’s joy was from beating Lilisha.

“I imagine Lilisha had other things to worry about!” said Alice. “In fact, I’m impressed she found the time to even take a test.”

Because they’d been caught up in various incidents with Lilisha, it felt natural to compete with her, but in reality, Lilisha was in a different class from Tesfia and the others. At most, they were together during joint lessons. And lately, she’d been very busy with everything around the new Aferka.

“It wasn’t like she had a lot of time to study, so it wasn’t really a fair competition,” said Alice.

“It’s fine. Don’t sweat the small stuff. As long as I’m happy, that’s all that matters.”

Despite Alice’s point, Tesfia’s smile remained unchanged. “Are you sure you should be saying that in front of people, Fia? It’s embarrassing.”

After a pause, Tesfia asked, “Is it? Are you sure I can’t?”

“You can’t! Lilisha barely even showed up for lessons in the latter half, and she still got that score,” Alice answered.

Realizing Alice was right, Tesfia’s shoulders dropped. But when Ciel heard that, she felt even worse.

“Hang on. What am I, an ordinary person, supposed to do hearing that? It’s heartbreaking, really,” Ciel said, full of emotions and sorrow.

She frowned. “Well, Ms. Lilisha is from a good family, and even though she and Alus are close, I don’t think they have scholarly ability,” Ciel said to console

herself, before letting out a heavy sigh. “How can you even keep up those scores? Well, not like I don’t already know the answer.”

They were close with Alus, who got perfect scores on all the subjects, and it was clear that he was overseeing Tesfia’s and Alice’s studying. Ciel recalled that he’d even taught her a lot during the Seven Nation’s Friendship Magical Tournament.

His teaching method aside, his guidance always led to results. It was very clear and straightforward. But when Tesfia heard Ciel’s statement, she plopped down on her desk with a sullen look.

“No, he didn’t teach us that much this time. It’s just that previous lessons proved helpful,” she said.

“Yeah. It was the same for me. Al is all about efficiency, adopting the stance that there’s no point in studying something that’s pointless. Having gotten used to that, we’ve learned to only cram in the necessary stuff,” said Alice, awkwardly scratching her cheek with a forced smile.

Of course, they had both studied hard for the tests, aware that Alus hadn’t taught them anything in particular this time around. If anything, they had applied what he’d been teaching them daily.

But being told that it was the result of daily efforts, Ciel couldn’t argue any more. The way she slumped in her seat stirred Alice’s protective instincts.

“I-I know! Why don’t we have Al teach all of us next time? How about that, Ciel?” asked Ciel.

“Alice...thank you!” Ciel said, tearing up. She unhappily puffed up her cheeks as she continued, “That aside, it seems like the teachers purposefully choose difficult questions. I heard them talking about it. Last time, the average score was unusually high compared to previous years.”

“R-Right... Uhm, sorry...” said Alice.

She understood Ciel’s anger and couldn’t help but feel apologetic, considering she was friends with someone who scored full marks on all subjects despite that—not to mention that she’d been raising the average herself.

“Well, that’s fine. But don’t nobles care a great deal about scores and ranks? Will this be okay?” Ciel asked, turning to Tesfia. Of course, she wasn’t particularly worried about her, considering her score was among the top.

“That’s a pretty biting tone, Ciel. Well, I know what you want to say. Looking at the classroom from the back like this, there’s a murderous vibe. Prideful people like that are quick to complain and form cliques,” Tesfia said like she knew it all. But when Alice and Ciel gave her an amazed look, Tesfia interrupted them with a cough. “Ahem, well, I doubt they would invite me along, but once they’ve got enough people, they’ll probably go complain to the Institute.”

Ciel looked at the rowdy crowd and agreed with her. “Even though it’s pointless. I wonder if appearances are that important.”

“Ciel, you can’t touch on that,” Alice chided her, holding a finger in front of her lips.

Tesfia wouldn’t mind, but the other noble students would. “Yes, the Fable family is one thing, but there are plenty of middle-ranking nobles that only have pride. If they lose face, their identities as nobles will fall apart, I guess. But having to rely on your family’s authority and preestablished values is a little...you know...” Tesfia stared, dismayed, at the group of nobles gathering and talking among themselves.

She abruptly stood up to change gears. “I know, Alice! The announcement of the results is the only thing we have today, so why don’t we go train after this? Besides, Al’s not here today.”

“Sure! I was going to anyways. What about you, Ciel?” asked Alice.

Ciel groaned and considered the offer. She debated reluctantly returning to the dorm and reviewing the exams, but in the end, she chose to exercise her body over her head.

“I’ll come. It’ll be a good diversion! So let’s go work up a sweat!” Ciel said. Once that was decided, she asked something that had been on her mind. “By the way, are Alus and Loki out on business or something?”

“Yeah, something like that. It’s that thing, you know...that job of his.”

Tesfia quickly gave an explanation, and she was pleased with how well she

had done it. The students had been told that Alus was only helping the military a little, but as someone who knew the truth, she would sometimes get it mixed up in it.

“Oh yeah! Even the military has noticed Alus. That’s so amazing.”

Tesfia felt a tinge of guilt at Ciel’s innocent reaction.

Well, I didn’t tell any lies... Tesfia insistently told herself.

Next to her, Alice wore a charming smile. She had a keen eye and knew what was behind Ciel’s attitude. Ciel probably didn’t know everything about Alus, but she most likely knew quite a bit more than Tesfia realized. But not saying that out loud was part of Alice’s kindness.

After that, the girls returned to their rooms, changed clothes, and gathered again at the dorm’s front door. As they made their way over, they found there were several groups heading to the training grounds ahead of them. The winning students, who had overcome the exams, were training in high spirits.

Ciel was carrying her AWR and looking around the training grounds. “What are we going to do? It looks like it’s already full. And there are third-years here too,” she said.

Students from the same year were one thing, but she was hesitant to overstep her boundaries and go ahead of her seniors. “Hmm, Fia and Alice, you are pretty high ranking. You don’t want anyone to see your magic, do you?” asked Ciel.

Novice Magicmaster or not, it was an unspoken rule to keep your trump cards hidden. The sections of the training grounds were even equipped with barriers to hide what was going on within them. Tesfia and Alice glanced at each other and then nodded.

“It’s okay. I’ve already been throwing Icicle Sword so much by now that it’s not like anyone seeing it will be a problem,” said Tesfia.

“Yeah, and frankly it’s not like there’s any point in hiding it unless you’re at Al’s level,” said Alice.

Thinking about it, they realized Alus had been with them during training a lot.

The concealing barriers had been necessary to hide his rank, but that was nothing to worry about now.

In the end, the three never entered a section of the training grounds but moved to the free space jointly used by the students. As if trying to avoid the gazes focused on Tesfia and Alice, Ciel walked behind them, shoulders back.

“You two really are like celebrities. It’s like being monitored from all over,” Ciel muttered.

But Tesfia and Alice were already used to the stares. Lately, with Alus gone pretty often, they would occasionally train without any barriers, so curious looks felt like a ridiculous thing to worry about.

“It’s all about getting used to it. More importantly, what are you going to do about the menu? Alice and I have tasks given to us, so we’re going to focus on those,” said Tesfia.

Ciel looked bewildered as the focus was suddenly turned to her. It wasn’t uncommon for normal first-year students not to have any clear or distinct goals. Even an honors student like Ciel. To them, training was just repeating what they’d learned in class.



In comparison, Tesfia and Alice were being trained by Alus. They didn't just repeat what they were taught; they had to think about all kinds of things with the aim of elevating themselves beyond what they currently were.

"Ah, what should I do? There is something that I've been working on for a while now," Ciel said with an embarrassed blush and looked away.

"Really? My, aren't you growing up so fast, Ciel," said Tesfia.

"I want to see it," said Alice.

"Then...I'll show you if you show me what you two are doing."

Deciding that a simple overview was no problem, Tesfia and Alice nodded. Of course, that was just a pretext. They just didn't want to be reserved around their petite and gentle friend.

The three headed for a corner of the free space and formed a circle. Tesfia and Alice only needed a little bit of space to train.

"We're actually in the process of learning new spells. By the way, I'm working on spatial designation and control. Although it's not going very well," Tesfia explained.

Alice followed after her. "Yeah, and as for me..." Alice removed the rings from her golden spear, Shangdi Fides and made one of them float. From the wrinkle on her forehead, she was using a lot of focus just for this demonstration.

Eventually, Alice gasped for breath, and the ring slowly floated to the ground.

This was just the beginning for handling Shangdi Fides. In the end, Alice would need to precisely understand and designate all of the coordinates rather than an approximate designation. It essentially demanded delicate control of all of the space around her.

Ciel couldn't imagine how long and painful the road would be, but she could instinctively tell how deep it was and gave honest applause. Alice gave her a quick bow in response. Her conduct seemed to mimic a polite, courteous illusionist.

It was a peaceful atmosphere, and Ciel decided to watch Tesfia train for a while.

“Just so you know, it’s much more plain than Alice’s,” Tesfia emphasized, but Ciel smiled as if to say that it wasn’t a problem. “Okay then...say, Alice. Why don’t we try out that thing?”

“Oh, you mean what we were talking about yesterday?” asked Alice.

“That’s the one. If we can train together, it’ll be like killing two birds with one stone,” Tesfia said, sitting down on the floor, putting her drawn katana, Kikuri, on top of her knees. “All right, preparations are all good.”

“Okay! Then here I go, Fia!”

Alice raised her hands, dexterously moving her fingers and skillfully manipulating the rings. One began to float up, and then another. She decided to start with two.

Alice moved the circles, tilting them side to side three meters in front of her and Tesfia, and stopped them. She gave Tesfia the signal with her eyes and began. Alice moved the two circles like they were gliding targets, and Tesfia used ice attribute magic to chase after them.

Specifically, Tesfia was imagining a three-dimensional space and freezing it, while Alice was moving the rings around to avoid them getting caught by freezing space. Alice had to read the signs of magic manifesting and move the rings, while Tesfia had to anticipate their trajectory and capture them.

It was a plain cat-and-mouse game, but it was one they could both play. And after three minutes, their mana control had dulled, and beads of sweat were rolling down their foreheads.

Ultimately, Alice was the first to throw in the towel. “I can’t take it anymore!” She lowered her hands, and the rings fell in response, rolling across the ground until they crashed into the wall and stopped.

“Really? I could keep going,” Tesfia boasted, wiping her face with a towel.

“Aren’t you two getting too good?” Ciel asked with an awkward smile.

“You think so? I’m still far away from the ideal, though,” Alice said, and she wasn’t even being modest. It was clear that she wasn’t on the level Alus wanted from her. She’d managed to link the movements of the rings to the movements

of her fingers, but she still had further to go. After fully mastering free movement in all directions, she needed to learn to control the speed and even how to move them in curves.

“But Alus is teaching you the basics, isn’t he?” asked Ciel.

“Y-Yeah,” said Alice.

“How lucky, I wish he could teach me more too. Well, I’d only cause him problems. But you know, training has been more fun since then,” said Ciel. She was no doubt referring to the basics Alus had taught her during the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament.

Nobody had expected much out of Ciel, but she had almost fully cornered her opponent before losing.

“Then why not ask Al directly? It’s not like he doesn’t know you, so I’m sure he’ll teach you...probably.” Tesfia’s tone was a little muddled, but she was confident that Alus wouldn’t ignore Ciel.

After that, they took a break to watch over Ciel’s training.

“Go on, don’t pay any attention to us; just go all out. We might be able to give you some advice,” said Tesfia.

“Okay, then take a look.” Ciel nodded at Tesfia and began her incantation. She had a long chant with several verses, and she was refining her mana as if resonating with her AWR, creating some kind of construct. Ciel used a staff AWR, and unusually, she’d inherited it from her parents. The AWR had signs of being well used, as well as a luster that showed it was being cared for.

Eventually, Ciel finished her incantation and struck the floor with the end of her staff, creating two pools of mana. From there, rocks in the shape of an arm appeared from each of them. It was similar to the novice-level Earth spell Mud Hand, but at a closer look, it was different.

“*«Golem Hand»*”

The stone hand was large enough to grab hold of an entire person. But as it grew up to the height of Ciel’s waist, the rock suddenly turned to sand and collapsed into a pile.

“Ahh...not again,” said Ciel. Her spell had collapsed and dispersed.

“You were so close! Actually Ciel, when did you even learn a spell like that?” asked Tesfia.

“Well, I’ve been picking it up little by little. But it’s still not complete.” Ciel shook her head, embarrassed. Like she said, she was still ways off from mastering the spell, and she was currently at a loss for how to proceed.

It had been like this for over a month. She’d taken the advice she got from teachers to lengthen her incantation, but it had only increased the amount of time before the rock turned into sand by a few seconds.

Tesfia looked at Ciel pensively. No matter how much she thought about it, it was unlikely that she’d be able to give Ciel any good advice. However, Alice seemed to be caught up on something and spoke up.

“Ciel, you’ve only ever used spells that change the shape of earth, right? So isn’t it strange to create a rock from that?”

“What do you mean? It’s the earth attribute, so isn’t that natural?” Tesfia asked, but Alice couldn’t give her a good answer and looked a little hesitant. If Alus were here, he’d surely be able to give a perfect answer that went deep into detail.

“Uhm... So this is just repeating what Al taught me, but people’s aptitude for magic is only really gathered under one attribute for the sake of convenience, but in reality there are actually different ways to manifest spells of the same attribute, and which way is best depends on the person. For example, Fia’s ice attribute could have people that are skilled at using small flakes of ice like a blizzard and those who use large lumps of ice.”

“I see. I’m confident at sculpting ice for my Icicle Sword, but not everyone who can use the ice attribute is good at that,” said Tesfia, clarifying what Alice had said.

“Yeah. And Ciel is probably used to imagining earth to manifest spells like Mud Hand. But now she’s suddenly creating rocks,” said Alice.

Tesfia seemed to understand. “True. It does look pretty brittle.”

“H-Huh? What does that mean? I can use other earth spells like Thorn Pierce,” said Ciel.

“But when manifesting, that’s not a rock itself, is it?” asked Alice.

“Hmm?” Ciel tilted her head in confusion. “When you put it like that, I guess not. I imagined packing earth together when casting Thorn Pierce. I see. So just increasing the hardness of earth doesn’t necessarily make it a rock. They look similar, but maybe it’s a different approach. I see,” said Ciel as her understanding dawned.

The misunderstanding had been solved, but it didn’t fix the fundamental issue. The three girls sat down and put their heads together to think of a solution.

Eventually, Alice came up with a suggestion. “Ciel, what is it that you want to do in the end? From what I can tell, there doesn’t seem to be any problem with the magic formula. I think the only bit left is shaping a better image of the spell when manifesting it. I also think that there’s that problem with the qualities of your mana. If you like, I could ask Al about it next time.”

“You would?!” asked Ciel. “Personally I’d love to learn magic the same way you two do. The method Alus taught me last time was something I never would have thought of, and it wasn’t the kind of idea the Institute would teach.”

“I know. Even if we asked the teachers about the approach we’re taking, we couldn’t hope for any proper advice...except maybe from the principal.”

Tesfia’s opinion was right on the mark. As far as Alus knew, the prevailing sense of modern magic relied too heavily on the image used to manifest a spell. That was the consequence of the development of assistance from AWRs and abbreviations of chants. But Alus had always objected to that method, believing that such shortcuts would end up being a detour. Therefore, he was beating his very own learning methods into these two. If not for Alus, they also would have long since hit a wall in learning their new spells.

“But this is a pretty vexing problem for users of the earth attribute.”

Ciel nodded at Tesfia’s words. Compared to the other attributes, the earth attribute had a wide variety of shapes and applications. It could be used for

simple attacks or creating obstacles or capturing. Creating projectiles, walls. footholds in high places, and the like. The earth attribute seemed to consist of several attributes in one.

“I’ve been doing my best, researching and learning, but it seems like other earth attribute users are struggling too,” said Ciel.

Thinking about it, it wasn’t just Ciel. Most of the students had different strengths and weaknesses in terms of their learning speed and proficiency. Contrary to its plain appearance, her attribute had some of the biggest highs and lows.

Alice suddenly thought of something she had noticed while watching Loki train a few days back.

She then whispered her suggestion to the other two. “I have a feeling that the normal methods of the Institute won’t work.”

“What?!” That left both Tesfia and Ciel astonished.

Sensing stares turning towards them because of their loud exclamation, Tesfia and Ciel looked around with startled expressions. They weren’t the only ones using the free space for training. There were plenty of first-years and even some second-years. And because Tesfia and Alice had done rather well in the Friendship Magical Tournament, they received quite a bit of attention from everyone at the Institute at all times.

Not only had they been doing some strange training, now they were talking in secret, so it was only natural that they’d stir everyone’s curiosity.

Seeing the situation for what it was, Ciel got back on track and looked at Alice. “Then can I try consulting with Alus?”

“Yes, that’s what I just said. Why would you confirm it again?” Alice asked Ciel, who stuck out her tongue.

“I just felt like I should get your approval first.”

Ciel was genuinely trying to be considerate. She’d jumped to the conclusion that one of the two girls wanted to keep Alus to themselves. After giving her a vacant look, Alice finally realized Ciel’s intentions and gave her an awkward

smile. “Ah, yes, it’s okay, so feel free to ask him. Also, the trick is to keep at it even if he looks fed up.”

“Y-Yeah, okay then!” Ciel said with relief, but Alice followed up with a question.

“That’s fine, but is that how we look? Like Al is one of our bodyguards, or...you know...our b-boyfriend? That’s pretty embarrassing.”

“Well, I’ve never seen Alus speak more than a few words to anyone other than you two. Oh, and Loki too.”

Ciel certainly made a good point. The way Alus built relationships was a little twisted for a student; it was only natural that he’d be labeled a loner. But Alus himself didn’t mind, so Tesfia and Alice weren’t sure what to think.

Alus’s ranking needed to be kept secret, but the two of them at least wanted him to enjoy his life as a student. Tesfia stopped to think, and her face turned sullen. Looking across from her, she saw Alice with the same expression, and the two smiled wryly at each other.

The problem, in short, was that Alus didn’t particularly want that kind of normal relationship. To him, the most comfortable student life was staying cooped up in the laboratory and devoting himself to his research. In fact, he only attended classes and writing tests because he had no choice.

He was fundamentally different from students who were there to learn.

Tesfia shook her head in resignation. “Well, maybe things are fine the way they are. It’s not like he doesn’t look happy doing that.”

“That’s true, and he’s steadily making new friends. Including a new one just the other day,” said Alice.

Tesfia questioned Alice’s dubious analysis. “You’re not talking about Lilisha, are you?”

“You got it!” said Alice.

Tesfia frowned and let out a heavy sigh. “That aside, we might look like a couple from a bystander’s point of view, huh?”

Student life was a way to enjoy one’s youth. Normally, that was the kind of

topic that would get lively, but Tesfia expressed herself without emotion. If they vehemently denied the relationship, then they would push Alus further away from the student life he wanted, not to mention that Tesfia and Alice were also comfortable in the present, which let Tesfia to say:

“Just let them say whatever they want.”

Of course, her answer might have changed if she overheard her class whispering about it. That was when she suddenly caught sight of a certain person in the audience seating area off the training grounds. The figure stood out even among the people who had come to watch the students train.

That’s unusual. I wonder if she’s here for some kind of tour or inspection or something, thought Tesfia.

It wasn’t a student; it was an adult woman. She wore a coat over her body, and beneath it was a boldly opened V-neck shirt, revealing her bosom. The warmer outfit made sense for the season, but it didn’t quite fit in with the Institute.

At her side was a female staff member serving as a guide, seemingly explaining the Institute’s facilities to her. They made wide gestures while seeming to talk about this or that.

“What’s going on?” Alice asked, following Tesfia’s gaze.

When she did, the woman seemed to notice, because she smiled and waved at them. “Is she someone’s mother?” asked Alice.

“She doesn’t really look that old to me. Maybe she’s Ciel’s...” Tesfia said, turning the spotlight on Ciel.

“No way. She’s too beautiful.” Ciel denied it while giving the woman a bow. After that, the woman turned around and left the training grounds. While staring at her back, Ciel gave her honest impression.

“She was pretty erotic,” Ciel said after a pause.

“Ciel?! What are you going to do if she hears you?!” Tesfia rebuked Ciel although she had more or less agreed with the girl’s impression. But it was probably fine. There was no way she could have heard it from that distance.

Like the principal, it seemed all the sexy women seen in the Institute were showing off all their adult charms. Personally Tesfia would love nothing more than to deny that the reason was their ample breasts, but Ciel refused to read the room.

“Wow, that must be what they call a dynamite body,” said Ciel.

“Well, that aside, that woman was wearing a guest card around her neck, so maybe she was here for a tour after all.” Tesfia pondered.

“Who could say,” said Alice.

It wasn’t like worrying about it would do anything. While the paperwork was a pain, it wasn’t like the Institute was closed to outsiders, so parents or siblings and the like would visit from time to time.

“But that’s enough of a break,” Tesfia said and stood up. Alice followed suit.

“Yeah. I better get back to training and master this stage, so I can move on to the next stage,” said Alice, but as she stood, her heavy chest swayed a little.

Seeing that, Ciel let out a “But you’re pretty erotic too,” earning her cold stares from both Tesfia and Alice.

“Sorry, it just came out.” She excused herself with a sorrowful expression. Tesfia and Alice both frowned (but for different reasons) and ignored Ciel to get back to their training.



At about the same time the results were posted, an unfamiliar visitor with a female staff member accompanying her was moving around the campus.

The Second Magical Institute had a near perfect manual for handling visitors, and because of its thoroughness, not just teachers but even administrators with free time could handle visitors.

That was, of course, because the Institute was funded by the government. This meant that it wasn’t just the students’ guardians who could visit the Institute. Anyone from Alpha could tour the campus as long as they went through all of the proper procedures. But that was just on the surface, as for security reasons not just anyone could walk around as they pleased.

Although information on the management, the number of pupils, and other aspects of the Institute were publicly available, outsiders were explicitly restricted from visiting without permission. As an educational organization with a responsibility to its students, they were particularly thorough in that aspect. The female visitor was no doubt one of the few exceptions.

“Next, please have a look at this building, Lady Cornelia,” the female staff member said, explaining the campus facilities one after another in a familiar manner. “This building consists of classrooms and the staff room, and it is where the majority of the lectures are held. Many among the teaching staff are also researchers; they carry out their research over in that building you can see over there.”

Just taking a look around the vast campus ground took a considerable amount of time. Because of that, the staff member kept the tour itself to the second floor of the main building and quickly moved on to explaining the next facility. The classrooms mostly had the same design, with the same furnishing, so there was no need to take a look at all of them.



The visitor, Cornelia, had appeared with a letter of introduction from a noble. When it came to important military or national figures, they were usually met by someone of appropriate stature. But in Cornelia's case, the atmosphere wasn't that heavy, and the contents of her letter of introduction had been very simple. All it had in it was a simple explanation of her status and a request to guide her around the campus.

Since the letter had come from Womruina, one of the three great noble families, it couldn't be brushed away. And the female staff member assigned to give her a tour couldn't lose her focus.

Additionally, Cornelia claimed that she belonged to the Crisis Management Committee, which meant she must have been a member of a state organization. Officially she was not here for any business but out of pure interest, but the Institute's staff weren't naive enough to take her for her word. They took after the Institute's principal in that regard.

"Do you have any questions?" the staff member asked Cornelia after going through her explanation.

"I believe it's fine... Ah, I do happen to have one question. Would all the teachers happen to be in the staff room right now?" Cornelia asked in a somewhat strange accent.

The female staff member answered right away. "That is not the case. Part-time lecturers use the staff room, but our regular teachers have individual rooms, so many of them return to their own rooms when they don't have any lectures or need to prepare materials. Incidentally, there is an assembly hall for faculty members as well, but it is practically a faculty building now."

"Is that so? Thank you," Cornelia quickly said, although her tone made it sound like she had no interest in the answer despite being the one who had asked.

The female staff member took the lead, hearing the sharp sound of Cornelia's heels striking the floor as they walked. She made sure the rude visitor could not see her cheeks twitch in response to Cornelia's behavior.

She also tried to hide her expression in response to the excessive amounts of

perfume the visitor wore, which she could smell even from a short distance. No matter how good it might smell, when something was this intense, it would numb the sense of smell. It also seemed to contain some unique ingredients. The staff member could tell it was something expensive, but she still found it a little vulgar. It seemed designed to stir the men who smelled it to get certain urges.

On that note, the visitor's shirt beneath her coat was open wide at her chest, her cleavage on full display. She felt that this visitor could use a little more understanding of where she was; this was a place of learning. But as a staff member, she didn't have the right to point that out. Besides, some of the students' guardians showed the same lack of morals, so there was no end to warning them.

The guided tour continued through the archives and library.

"Next is the training grounds; these are pretty much a must for Magic Institutes. In addition to the required practical lessons, it is open to the students for independent training after class," explained the staff member. Considering the organization the visitor was from, she also made sure to add some information about the security. "This Institute has increased its number of guards and strengthened the patrols that watch over the Institute twenty-four hours a day. On top of that, there are surveillance cameras, a mana detection system, and strict security systems in place."

"Hmm, I see. Well, it has been pretty dangerous lately..." mused Cornelia.

"Ah, yes, as you say." The staff member was taken off guard by Cornelia's weak response to her explanation and briefly looked puzzled. As Cornelia was part of the Crisis Management Committee, she had expected the security to be vital to her.

Maybe she really had come only out of personal curiosity? With that doubt in mind, the staff member opened the door leading to the audience seats of the training room and guided Cornelia inside.

"With the students' safety as our priority, we have a large-scale mana substitution system in place that is also used by the military. The only thing on the schedule today was the results being posted, so it is particularly busy here

today. Our students are very passionate about training and learning spells.” The female staff member took a look at Cornelia, and at the same time, she looked at the students working hard to better themselves with a warm smile.

“What is that?” Cornelia pointed to the dark partitions lined up.

“Those are barriers set up for privacy. Anyone can use them, but they see particularly large use by the third-year students looking to join the military, as well as the children of nobles.”

“Hmm, look at them wriggling...” muttered Cornelia.

“Excuse me?”

The female staff member tilted her head at Cornelia’s mumbling, but all she got in response was a vague smile. The next moment, Cornelia furrowed her brows and her sharp eyes stared on a single point: three female students talked among themselves.

Suddenly one of them looked over. Cornelia answered with a smile, and the female staff member spoke up with pride.

“All of those students are hard workers. They spend every day training to become better Magicmasters. They all had good results at the last Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament. In fact, their hard work and effort are even an inspiration to the faculty and staff. And despite only being first-years, two among them are model students that have top class results.”

“Is that so? That’s enough of this place.” Cornelia’s coarse remark as she got up from the spectator’s seat betrayed the staff member’s expectations. She opened the door and walked out, unhappily frowning. “Ridiculous. It’s like a nest of brats...”

“I-Is something the matter?” asked the female staff member, rushing to Cornelia’s side with a laudable attitude.

But Cornelia answered in a cold tone. “Oh, it’s nothing...” But then as if having noticed something, she asked, “Oh, it’s about time. By the way, where would the AWR vault be?”

Cornelia—Mir Ostayka, currently in disguise—casually gave the female staff

member who had no idea about the truth a venomous smile with plenty of malice behind it.



Surely nobody had expected it.

Surely, they had all forgotten...

...that true peace didn't exist and that they should prepare for evil all the while turning their eyes away from it.

So it wasn't until they heard the footsteps of a nightmare that they finally remembered. It was then that they confronted evil and reaffirmed its existence.

Ah, to think evil was this close.

Tesfia, Alice, and Ciel were at the training grounds, each working on their own tasks. Students were normally discouraged from using the training grounds for long periods of time, but using a corner of it wasn't too big of a problem.

They were able to spend their time training so intensely that they didn't mind the stares. The damage substituting system was always in effect, even outside the partitions, but the three didn't have any mock battles today. They got a few invitations from people they knew, but they turned them all down to focus on what they needed to do.

But no matter how much of a sweat they worked up and how much they exhausted themselves, Tesfia and Alice weren't satisfied. It wasn't like they weren't putting their all into it, but something felt off. They didn't even feel like they'd exceeded the levels of the other students. That was probably because they'd seen Loki's training up close, and that was an example of how someone who'd fought on the front lines trained.

They couldn't find the right way to describe it, but they were well aware that there was a decisive gap between them. It wasn't a matter of difference in how earnest, passionate, zealous, or serious they were, but there was a real gap between them.

Tesfia stopped what she was doing and exhaled. She wiped away a bead of sweat with her sleeve and pondered, "I wonder what's different..."

That difficult-to-scale wall didn't just exist between her and Loki but with Alus as well. Perhaps it was the difference between those who knew the world and those who didn't. She had only been out in the real world once on an extracurricular lesson. She'd learned a lot, but that was only a small part of it.

Tesfia remembered seeing Alus that one time. It wasn't long after he had enrolled... He had probably been on his way out for a mission. She recalled his expression beneath the moonlight as she had happened to see him. His eyes read cold yet enlightened and were filled with a strong will, giving him a presence that was hard to approach.

Strict training or not, is it the difference between them and those of us who have grown up in the safety of this world? Or because I don't know how cruel the world can truly be? The question floated up into Tesfia's mind, but no matter how far she pursued it, she couldn't find an answer.

"It doesn't help to think about it, Fia. Loki dear is something else," Alice, covered in more sweat than Tesfia, said. She had actually been thinking about the same thing just now.

Because they had seen how Loki trained, they'd been made aware of how poor their own training was. But regardless of how vexed they were, they knew that nothing would come from it. In the end, they would need to do what they could, which was to steadily build up themselves.

Even so, they felt impatient.

"I know, but...Alice, what do you think? Is it just a fundamental difference in resolution when training?"

Alice shook the end of her hair, which was soaked in sweat, and closed her eyes for a moment. Quietly exhaling, she spun her golden spear and lowered the tip with beautiful flowing movements before releasing her posture. "See, this is the limit of what I can do. It still hasn't left the realm of martial arts, like it's not enough to break through."

The movements were beautiful, but they lacked impact. She felt like it was just a technique following a set form and nothing more. Those who had fought with their lives on the line and allowed their talents to blossom to their full potential had an indisputable persuasiveness and depth to their movements.

Meaning that she and Tesfia were just lacking the greatness that would come naturally to them.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Well, it’s not like I don’t understand. But does that mean that we’ll never reach that realm?” asked Tesfia.

Alice put her finger beneath her lip to think. “Hmm, how would I put this? I’m sure that people can’t ever really know.”

It was a rather vague phrasing, but Tesfia’s eyes opened wide as if she’d become convinced. She then closed her eyes, and with a cool expression, she quietly murmured a small truth to herself. “I see... Yeah, even Loki is a far way away.”

Tesfia looked a little happy, and Alice nodded and smiled. Interested, Ciel stopped her own training to call out to them. “What are you two talking about? You looked like you were talking about something really difficult and now you suddenly look so satisfied.”

“Well, simply put, it was about the difference in experience. Ahh, I wish I could go out into the Outer World more,” said Tesfia.

This time it was Ciel’s turn to open her eyes wide. She seemed to have been thinking about something herself as now her brow furrowed with an anxious look. “That’s true. It’s only an armchair theory, but it doesn’t really feel like just learning at the Institute will serve us in the future. Like what is this power for? Wait, did I sound like a brooding hero for a moment there?”

“You can be pretty sharp sometimes, Ciel,” Alice said, putting her hand on Ciel’s head and patting her fluffy hair with a bright smile. Ciel’s cheeks relaxed in response, and even Tesfia relaxed.

She looked down at her hands, slowly opening and closing her hands. “That’s true. What is this power for...? That’s what we need to know.”

They needed to accumulate experience, but that probably wasn’t something they should be in such a rush to get their hands on. Besides, if it was necessary, Alus would have definitely said something—it might have been disparaging words said mercilessly and without reservation, but it would’ve been advice to guide them to the peak he stood on.

Tesfia suddenly realized how much trust she had for him, and as she realized that, the sight of his cynical face appeared in her mind. Funnily enough, it was as easy for her to imagine as a lovestruck maiden thinking of the man she fancied. Feeling her cheeks unconsciously heat up, Tesfia firmly closed her mouth again.

“What’s with that face, Fia? I can’t tell if you’re twitching or smiling... It’s actually a little scary,” said Ciel.

Ciel’s dubious stare made Tesfia focus even more on keeping her facial muscles in check. “Y-You fink sho? It’s nhot a prohlem.”

“Fia, you know, you have a pretty rich imagination. You seem like the type that can see images in your head.”

Ciel had a sharp analytical ability, and Alice gave her an affirming nod.

Alice then wore a proud smile as if she knew everything. “Fia tends to make up things that are convenient for her in her mind. And it quickly shows on her face if she’s not careful.”

“N-No!” Tesfia denied it on pure reflex, and she blushed even harder as she tried to cover it up.

One would not expect to see such a relaxed moment during a training session, but because of the peaceful atmosphere around them, nobody around would blame them. Even that black-haired boy would have hesitated, were he here.

However...something happened that completely changed the atmosphere on the training grounds.

A huge impact radiated beneath their feet like an undulating wave. It was a massive tremor, as if the earth itself had split. Before long it had spread throughout the entire building, and a thunderous roar assaulted the students.

For a few seconds, everyone stopped as if they were frozen, then chaos began to unfold. People shouted, and the senior students were busy confirming that nobody was hurt.

Tesfia and the others were relieved the building hadn’t collapsed.

“Th-That was scary. What was that?” Ciel asked with relief, feigning calmness.

But Tesfia's and Alice's faces were completely pale and frozen. Then there was another explosive sound, and a moment later, the training ground's roof was blown away as if torn off by a giant, invisible hand.

"Ciel!!!" Tesfia suddenly pushed Ciel away, and they both rolled across the ground.

Rubble rained from above, smashing to the ground. Fortunately, they had been in a corner, so nothing had happened to them. And because the senior students had been quick to evacuate, nobody appeared to have been buried beneath the rubble.

Even so, not everyone was unharmed. There were grunts of pain and cries for help.

"Th-Thank you, Fia..." said Ciel.

"Y-Yeah. But there's something going on here," said Tesfia, who was holding down Ciel's petite body protectively, vigilantly only moving her head around.

Looking at the audience seats, Tesfia understood the cause of the incident and felt her heart begin to beat wildly. In the middle of the seating opposite them was a huge oval-shaped rock. It had blown away the seats, transforming the area around it.

Just looking at it left her speechless. Who could have expected a meteor to fall from the sky?

The next moment, a high-pitched scream echoed from somewhere outside the training grounds. It carried an unbelievable sense of urgency, giving Tesfia goose bumps from the tragedy she envisioned. One after another, the screams increased, all of them coming from the main building.

Scenes from when the mad scientist, Godma Barhong, and the dolls that served him had attacked the Institute came to mind. Since it had heavily concerned her best friend, Alice, it was still fresh in her mind. Fortunately, it had ended without incident thanks to the principal.

Tesfia looked over to Alice and found her staring at where the rock had crashed, expression grim. At that moment...

“Ms. Tesfia, Ms. Alice, everyone, please hurry up and evacuate,” a senior student said with an impatient look on her face. She was acquainted with the two.

“Senniat...” Alice recognized her. She was a second-year who had been working as a supervisor during the extracurricular lesson.

Ciel hurriedly stood up and began walking towards the aisle entrance on the opposite side of the grounds, but Alice looked as if she was against the evacuation. Tesfia’s expression was the same, and instead of following the instructions, she asked a question with a stern look.

“Senniat, have you heard anything about what’s going on outside?”

“No, I don’t know anything. Even so, it’s dangerous to stay here. So we need to begin by evacuating everyone, and then we can leave it up to security and the teachers,” Senniat said sternly, feeling responsibility as a second-year.

She was practically saying that now wasn’t the time for arguing. That said, Senniat understood that this was no mere accident. A massive rock crashing into the audience seat was nothing short of a joke.

“Then the people who can move should confirm the situation!” Tesfia shouted.

She felt her duty as a noble, but the abnormal presence coming from outside was what bothered her the most. It was like the mana was caressing her skin, and she couldn’t shake the chills she was feeling.

Alice nodded along with Tesfia, her golden spear in hand. The tremors and thunderous roars continued the entire time. Something abnormal was no doubt happening, and security was likely trying to deal with it outside. At the very least, magic was clearly being used. But if such powerful magic was being used on the campus, Tesfia could only imagine the worst possible scenario.

“I-I understand. But I can’t let you two go on your own.”

As Senniat said that, some seniors wielding their AWRs made their way over, having resolved themselves. They were all third-year students with offers from the military waiting for them. Student naivete was completely gone from their faces, and the leader among them was dauntless.

“Ms. Fable, this is indeed an emergency situation. I’ve been gathering a party to investigate what happened. We’re planning on helping the teachers if need be,” the male student said politely, yet concisely.

From what Tesfia could tell, he was a child from a noble family. And his polite words were likely due to him being conscious of her lineage.

Tesfia responded to the calm senior student in kind. “Yes, we were just talking about doing the same.”

The sweat she’d worked up during training had already gone cold and was starting to dry. The pride to uphold one’s duty as a noble was necessary at a time like this. While she felt the need to lead by example, Tesfia felt uneasy as she looked at the group. Alice was the same. The other students had a dangerous glint in their eyes.

They might be acting resolute, but their mana tells a different story, thought Tesfia.

Having reached a certain level of mana control, she and Alice could sense the wavering in the mana the third-years were emitting. Their senses, sharpened by Alus’s training, allowed them to sense the other students’ anxiety all the more clearly.

However, the leader ignored his own doubts and nodded firmly to himself as he looked between Senniat and Alice. “Second-year student, Senniat Fokmil, I take it you will come with us?” asked the third-year student.

“Yes, after escorting Ms. Ciel to safety. I am worried about Ms. Tesfia, after all.”

“All right. Then what about you?” he asked, looking at Alice.

“I’m going with Fia,” she answered with resolve.

And while the other reacted with hesitation, the leader slightly nodded to her. “Well, you are Ms. Fable’s friend, and there doesn’t seem to be any need to worry about your abilities.”

Giving her a glance, he seemed to be leaving the decision of Alice

accompanying her up to Tesfia. The senior was acting out of respect for the prestige of the Fable family rather than his own pride. Although it was admirable, it was also a little unreliable. But to Tesfia at that moment it was a godsend.

“I understand.” She nodded, and he began explaining.

“Bringing the junior students to safety is our duty as seniors, but Fable and Tilake abilities are beyond all doubt.” He got right to work giving orders. “First, we’ll split into two groups. The third-years and I will head towards the main building, where we can hear the sounds of battle. Fable, I want your group to move behind the main building, and I want this person to accompany you.”

A third-year student stepped forward, but Tesfia’s and Alice’s faces showed bitterness. The student didn’t look particularly reliable to them thanks to his anxious expression. But since they were splitting into groups, it was only natural that they would get another student in their group.

“I want you to secure an evacuation route. Follow the teachers’ orders and avoid getting into any combat as much as you can,” said the third-year.

The explosive sounds had stopped for now, but there had definitely been fierce combat near the main building. If something had happened, it was there.

Tesfia steeled herself and raised her voice. “This is an abnormal situation, so there is only so much we students can do. So I think we should try to help any injured. The sounds of battle are probably from an act of terrorism or intruders, so it might be better to head for the main building in a smaller group.”

She spoke with the pride of a noble. But most of all, she was exploiting the third-year students’ excessive sense of justice. If they were standing up as nobles, then as a high-ranking noble, Tesfia wanted to take the initiative to take the lead. Besides, with their level of mana control, they might not be able to handle what they found. On top of that, they had been training up until now and were likely more exhausted than Tesfia and Alice.

The leader digested Tesfia’s suggestion and thought for a while before reaching a decision.

“Then can I ask you to go to the main building and confirm the situation?”

Splitting up into two groups was the best way to gather as much information as possible, but he still looked worried. “If you feel you’re in danger, make sure to run away.”

“Yes, Alice and I will go confirm the situation.”

But just as relief washed over Tesfia, the third-year leader said, “No, we can’t leave it to the two of you. Senniat Fokmil should do it.”

As he said it, he sent Senniat a timid look. He wanted her to make the decision and take responsibility if the time came. Senniat was the only one who could do it instead of Tesfia, who stood for the Fable name.

“I understand. Ms. Tesfia, Ms. Alice, I trust you don’t mind. If you can’t accept this, you can forget about this entire thing,” said Senniat.

Tesfia and Alice both nodded. The leader picked two more from the group and assigned them to lead the evacuations. And so they ultimately split into three groups: the evacuation group, the third-year group, and the Tesfia group.

The evacuation group headed for the exit with Ciel.

“Don’t be reckless, you two. And, Alice, don’t take your eyes off Fia,” said Ciel.

“Why are you singling out me?!” Ciel worriedly looked over at a somewhat furious Tesfia.

“Don’t worry. I will watch over the two of them.” Senniat smiled at Ciel, which finally put her at ease. Then she spoke with resolution, “Then let us go, Ms. Tesfia, Ms. Alice.”

The three moved through the side entrance and left the training grounds. Once outside, they could see thick, black smoke rising up from several places. There were signs of destruction here and there, and they unintentionally gulped at the sight.

“N-No way.” Alice’s eyes opened wide in shock.

The research building that had Alus’s laboratory had been seriously damaged. There were crescent-shaped scars, like giant claws had cut it, and half of the building had collapsed. Tesfia stared like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Alus’s laboratory that they visited every day was now bare and exposed

to the elements.

Seeing the two standing still, Senniat called out to them. “You two! With this much damage, this is without a doubt an emergency. Let’s move along the shadows of the buildings and—Tesfia! Alice!” Calling out to them a second time, the two finally returned to their senses and looked at Senniat. “I know you’re in shock. But it’s too dangerous to space out right now!”

“I-I’m fine. R-Regardless of what happened or who did it, we need to find a safe evacuation route,” Tesfia said, as if to convince herself.

The three of them moved, taking advantage of the blind spots in the building. The familiar Institute had completely changed. Confusion and unrest took hold, and the sight made it feel like their uniforms were out of place.

They held their breath and suppressed their mana as they moved. Not long after they began, they came close to the entrance to the main building. The distance normally only took a few minutes, but it had taken them more than ten this time.

Tesfia stuck part of her face out from the side of the wall to take a peek. The shocking scene made her bite down on her lip to keep herself from screaming. In her panic, she quickly returned to the shadow of the building, and without paying any attention to Alice or Senniat, she leaned against the wall and slid down. She sobbed and tears welled up in her eyes.

When they saw Tesfia holding her hands over her mouth, they took a peek as well.

And what they saw there was a one-sided massacre. That was why the sounds of battle had stopped. The plaza in front of the entrance was littered with bodies. Blood gathered in the gaps between the cobblestone, ran like a river where it overflowed.

The horrid sight was enough for anyone to look away. Some had their limbs broken; others were cut in half... The majority were security, but some teachers seemed to have fallen as well.

It was like a scene from hell. The only saving grace was that the hundred or so students in the main building, as well as the teachers, who had given up on

resisting seemed to be okay. They were on their knees with their hands on the backs of their heads. They were pale from the shock, and the sudden slaughter had left them in despair.

“Wha... What the hell?!” Senniat spat out after returning to the shadow of the building. With a pale face, she gripped her bangs. She somehow managed to pull herself together and remember her duty. “W-We’re turning back right now! I won’t accept any objections.”

“But...” Alice slightly raised her eyebrows and looked over to her side at Tesfia, who had a difficult-to-describe expression.

Was she shocked or trembling with anger? Or perhaps it was neither. She had squeezed her hands into fists so hard that her nails dug into her palms and spilled blood.

But her appearance was enough for Senniat’s sense of danger to start warning her. “S-Stop! From the looks of everyone in there, there must be multiple attackers, and the survivors are being forced to follow their orders. And if they’re a group, then there is definitely a mastermind in charge! We have to confirm that first. From what I can see there are ten of them. Not even the teachers or security could stand a chance against them. We need to gather information and bring it back to everyone.”

Tesfia looked at her with despair and anger. She wanted to charge in immediately, but that compromise was the best that Senniat could offer.

Was it her personality or her pride as a noble that made her so dangerous? While faced with those emotions, Senniat resolved herself to protect Tesfia and Alice no matter what.

She peeked out from the shadow of the building again. “Still, not all of the attackers have hidden their faces, and looking at their numbers, there are five...nine...twelve of them. They probably all have AWRs.”

“No, there should have been one who didn’t have it. He is probably the leader. I got a good look you know!” Tesfia said, having calmed down a little.

“What?!” asked Senniat.

Tesfia appeared to have been completely swallowed by her emotions, but it

was to be expected of a brilliant novice Magicmaster and the daughter of the Fable family.

Senniat hurriedly took another look and found a man in an overcoat boldly standing in the middle of the plaza as if overwhelming his surroundings. He didn't have anything that looked like an AWR on him, but the smile on his lips made it look like he was enjoying the situation.

At some point, one of the attackers had dragged over a security guard who was still drawing breath. The guard was breathing raggedly, groaning from pain at the wound to his abdomen. The man in the overcoat and his ally coldly looked down at the poor victim.

"S-Stop it!" the man's voice rang out.

"What are you after?! Y-You don't have to hurt anyone else!" A male teacher stood up from the group of hostages. His voice was trembling a little as he bravely questioned the attackers.

Unable to just listen, Tesfia lined up next to Senniat to peek around the building. One of the attackers twisted the male teacher's arm behind his back and then stabbed a knife into his thigh.

"Aaaagghhh!!!" the man cried as the attacker threw him to the ground.

"You're not the one who gets to decide that," the attacker said with a grin.

Next, the man who'd dragged the security guard over made a suggestion to the man in the overcoat. "I know. Why don't we use him, Dante?"

"Hmm, you've already lost your patience? Well, fine. Do whatever you want," the assumed leader, Dante, said briefly. His tone was flat, as if he'd just given permission to a subordinate to play around a little and kill time. But his choice of words made it apparent that he didn't care for the life of people.

The attacker happily nodded and told the other attacker to drag the teacher he'd stabbed over to him, knife and all. He then grabbed the injured guard and teacher by the collars and dragged them in front of the pile of corpses.

Letting go of the teacher's collar, he looked at the guard and spoke. "Teach, we have one knife here. If you use this to kill this guy, we won't kill you. As a

bonus, we'll release about half the students."

When told that, the teacher's eyes opened wide and his body froze. Sweat beads ran down his forehead as all of the students attentively listened to him. All of the attackers looked on like it was a spectacle. The teacher looked up at the man who had made such a cruel declaration with desperation in his eyes.

"Whatcha looking at me for? You've already got a knife in your leg. Use that. This guy's going to die either way. You might have a severed aorta too. That's a lot of blood, so you better hurry, Teach," taunted the attacker.

Would he choose to die from blood loss, or hurry up the death of a security guard who would die one way or another? It was clear that all of the students, forced to look down, were focusing on the teacher's answer.

"D-Don't be stupid," the male teacher said with clattering teeth, looking up at the attacker who'd made the insane suggestion. However, the other side didn't seem to be in a particularly bad mood, as expected. Instead he acted as if he'd anticipated that reaction and gave him an eerie smile.

"What a model answer," he said, reaching for the teacher's thigh and violently pulling out the knife. The male teacher groaned, and the attacker coldly stared as blood poured out. "Well, you'll die either way," he said and wiped the knife clean on the teacher's clothes.

Tesfia instinctively leaned forward at the violent scene, but Senniat desperately grabbed her clothes and stopped her. She could easily imagine what Tesfia was thinking based purely on her expression. Tesfia was on the verge of blowing her top, and her shaking fist was the biggest sign of that.

"Stop it! You need to calm down. Nothing will come from us going out there!" Senniat's reprimanding voice trembled.

Like Tesfia, she'd witnessed that scene, which was like cruelty given form. And that was all the more reason for her to stop Tesfia or Alice from going. Her calm was bolstered by her fear, and it overwrote any anger she felt. She knew it was weak, but Senniat believed she had to evacuate the two no matter what, even if it was by force.

"Let's retreat."

Tesfia looked back as if to object, and Senniat couldn't look her directly in the eyes.

"So are you just going to leave them to die?! I can't do that!" said Tesfia.

"That's not what I'm saying," said Senniat. "But what can we even do if we go out there? There will only be more victims." Senniat gritted her teeth in helplessness.

Tesfia bit her lip, then said, "If only Al was here... He would definitely manage something!"

It sounded like leaving it to someone else, but she understood that Senniat was right, and she believed in that boy's strength. Even without Alus here, she couldn't help but think that way.

It wasn't like she was underestimating the attackers. If anything, she was prepared for the risk of death as foolhardiness born of youth and righteous indignation welled up within her.

She felt that was the point of being a noble. Because of the blood that ran through her veins, she needed to be nobler and braver than anyone else. If not, she wouldn't have come to the Magical Institute to begin with. Having started to walk her path, Tesfia couldn't follow Senniat's instructions.

Eventually, the attacker moved behind the male teacher and swung the knife down with an underhand grip. When she saw that, Tesfia's body moved on its own. She put her hand on her sword, leaned forward, and took a step forward.

But as she did, a strange, continuous sound echoed around the surroundings. At the edge of their vision, they could see pillars shooting up from the ground. It appeared to be some kind of mechanism burrowed beneath the Institute.

Tesfia looked back at Senniat.

The mechanism had appeared once before when Sisty had repelled a taboo spell assaulting the Institute. They were magic towers that had supported the former Single Digit Magicmaster, which meant that she was making her move.

"The principal is coming! We just have to buy enough time until then!" Tesfia said to Senniat as if it were an absolute truth. The attackers seemed taken

aback by the appearing towers. So if they moved now...

“Yeah! If all we have to do is rescue that teacher and retreat, then we can do it!” Alice agreed with Tesfia and looked to Senniat.

“Senniat, keep them in check and make preparations for escaping. Does that work for you, Fia?” asked Alice.

“Yeah!” said Tesfia.

Despite how nervous she was, Alice’s face glowed with the pride of doing the right thing. With that, their plan was in place.

But the next moment, a large, sharp branch ran across the wall and attacked Tesfia’s slightly exposed body. The branch moved like it had a will of its own, surging from one of the attacker’s feet.

“They’ve found us!” Tesfia swiftly dodged the branch and started running. Alice ran after her.

The branch they dodged destroyed a wall and then stopped rather than going after Senniat. It seemed he hadn’t noticed Senniat’s presence with Tesfia and Alice. That meant she could launch an ambush... With that, the girls began their plan to save the male teacher.

The principal will come soon! And if everyone rises up to resist with this, we might even be able to capture the attackers! thought Tesfia.

Of course, it also meant killing the opponent. As that thought ran through Tesfia’s mind, she gripped her katana harder.

Meanwhile, the attacker didn’t show much concern for Tesfia and Alice, doing nothing more than looking at them. He was drenched in blood that had splattered on him, but the way he appeared completely unfazed was abnormal.

The man who’d launched a giant branch at them now stood in Tesfia and Alice’s path instead. He appeared to be a tired and balding middle-aged man with a twig in his mouth. He clicked his tongue in annoyance at the fact that they’d avoided his attack, frowning at the bother.

They needed to take out the two attackers in their way. Tesfia resolved herself for it. They needed to be neutralized swiftly and without fail.

“Tsk...you’re pretty quick for some rats!” the bald man said eerily as he lightly tossed the twig. When he did, it started growing explosively fast and stretched out towards the two.

Tesfia and Alice split up at the last moment and barely dodged the attack. They heard the sound of cobblestone ground being smashed behind them by the sharp branches.

“Fia!” yelled Alice.

Tesfia nodded at Alice, and Alice left a gap between her and Tesfia to focus her attack on the man with the branches. She pulled back her arms, gripping her golden spear, and a pale magical light instantly enveloped the blade.

“*«Sirislate»!*”

As Alice thrust the spear, light shot towards the man. He responded by creating a wooden shield with twisted tree rings and a mirrorlike luster of mana. But the thrust of light easily pierced the shield and grazed his abdomen, burning his clothes. His exposed skin began to ooze blood.

However, Alice’s real target hadn’t been him but the man with the knife. In order to create an opening to save the male teacher, she’d moved to line up the bald man and knife-wielding man.

Before Alice could speak, the man with the knife took a single step to dodge Alice’s spell. Despite showing no concern, he had been surprisingly alert. But there was still a slight gap between the attacker and the male teacher.

Having slightly lost his balance, the man with the knife looked at Alice. His thin smile disappeared and he stared at Alice, his eyes sharp like a predator. Then a horizontal swing assaulted him, but he blocked it with his knife, and there was a metallic sound as he retreated a little to ward off the power.

“Are you okay?! Someone, help him...!” Tesfia shouted, but none of the students moved. Or rather, some steeled themselves and tried to stand up, but a powerful wave of mana forced them back down.

It came from the leader of the attackers, who remained unmoving with his arms crossed—they called him Dante.

It wasn't the amount of mana but rather his presence that gave off so much pressure. They were forced to acknowledge that he was in a dimension of his own. It was probably Tesfia's intuition as a Magicmaster that made her realize that, and she recognized it as the source of the chill she'd felt in the training grounds.

Tesfia couldn't even look directly at the unmoving man. This was the first time she'd felt so much fear from intimidation through mana. It was like her heart was being squeezed, and sweat poured down from her forehead.

"Dante, you don't mind if I kill her, do ya?"

With a snap of his wrist, the man with the knife began walking towards her with a grin. Tesfia swung her katana sideways again, also using Ice Blade to cover the blade in ice. But the man just swung the knife two, then three times, and the ice fell off.

Dante didn't so much as look over at the skirmish as he answered the man. "Yeah, if she resists, just kill her."

That alone was enough to completely remove any fighting spirit from the other students.

His eyes, his voice, and his mana were enough to crush any will to resist. Tesfia was no exception to his influence, and if she lost her willpower even once, she would struggle to even remain standing. So she controlled her mana as well as she could and took a deep breath.

Her goal wasn't the attackers' leader, Dante. Right now she only needed to deal with the man in front of her.

"So there you have it! You have bigger problems on your hands than some dying teacher," said the man with the knife as he crouched down and abruptly put his weight on one of his legs. The next moment, he seemed to have disappeared, only to have moved right in front of Tesfia.

The oncoming sense of death made her stop breathing. Only her training allowed her to move her body. She swung her katana down, but he swung his knife towards her throat faster.

Images of her death ran through Tesfia's mind. Quickly, she twisted her neck

and turned her upper body to escape the deadly blade. The cold knife grazed her neck, and the fear of blood spurting out made her cower.

She brought her hand to her neck, as if to make sure that her head was still connected to her body. When she saw a red line of blood on her hand, she gulped by reflex. That was more than enough for her to realize the difference in their experience fighting, or rather in killing.

Seeing Tesfia like that, the man sneered at her. “Take a look at your feet—the ground’s red with your teacher’s blood. As for this guy...ah, he’s already started going cold,” the man said, his face the very definition of repulsive, contorted as it was in amusement over the pooling blood.

As Tesfia ground her teeth, the man continued to speak without end. “Finally, some reckless idiot showed up. I was getting tired of the lack of resistance. So do your best to put up a fight; it’ll be more fun for me too.”

Tesfia glared but said nothing to the man, who was in high spirits that the kind of person he’d waited for had finally shown up. The attackers were completely outnumbered but completely composed.

Seeing as the guards and teachers had been taken out without standing a chance, each attacker was no doubt skilled. Even so, there were far too few of them to control the entirety of the vast campus, and the Institute had an adequate number of security guards and teachers for the campus.

So what were they after? What were they hoping to accomplish by taking the students hostage? From the look of it, they were just madmen who took pleasure in killing.

The students who’d wanted to respond to Tesfia’s call would eventually join the military as Magicmasters. They might still be amateurs, but they were still a force to be reckoned with. And maybe the attackers were fully aware of that...and were waiting around here for something.

As proof of that, the leader, Dante, had said to kill the students if they resisted. In other words, they would not be killed as long as they didn’t resist.

They seemed to have some goal in mind. And Dante’s words had proven very effective. Whether it was on purpose or not, his declaration had deprived the

hostages of their will to resist.

One's state of mind was particularly fragile when faced with an extraordinary situation. There was no guarantee the attackers would ever hold their word, but when given a low-risk option that avoided the worst possible scenario, people tended to cling to it.

At the moment, the attackers had absolute power over whether the hostages lived or died. In that sense, the situation was far more serious than Tesfia had expected, but that was all the more reason she couldn't accept it. She would never accept the way they so casually played with lives and spilled blood for no reason.

"It will be fun? Do you people not feel a thing?!" Tesfia practically burst, burning with anger. Having been born and raised as a noble of a great house, perhaps it was impossible for her to ever understand how criminals thought. That said, she was well aware there was more to the world than just beauty.

Due to weakness, sometimes from poverty, sometimes from anger, people would at times disturb order, lose reason, and kill innocent people like wild beasts. That might have been a daily occurrence in parts of the world she never saw.

However, the people in front of Tesfia right now most definitely had their wits about them. In fact, they were enjoying the harm they caused, like people's lives were nothing but toys to them. It was an act that exceeded what a normal person would be capable of, as if they were demons wearing human skin.

"Huh? Now ain't this hilarious. Are students nowadays all this stupid?"

Tesfia rushed forward in anger at the man who laughed at the cries of her heart. A burning indignation welled up from the depths of her soul. She felt ridiculous for even talking to such a brute. He was evil in the shape of a person; words wouldn't work on him.

She unleashed her mana and unconsciously controlled it. It converged in her body and froze the blade of her katana, Kikuri. She didn't underestimate her opponent, who only had a knife, but she wasn't going to wait and see what he did.

Behind Tesfia, a sword of ice formed.

“◀◀Zepel▶▶”

She incanted the spell in her head as she approached the man, and a massive ice sword froze the air. But in the next moment, her eyes opened wide. She had been unable to process his move. He neither dodged nor blocked, just closed in on her instead.

With Tesfia’s ice sword, she had the advantage in reach, but he had closed in so fast that she had no choice but to block his attack with Kikuri. On top of that, his knife was clad in mana, turning red from the extreme heat.

It slid off the edge of Kikuri’s blade and into Tesfia’s left shoulder, cutting her flesh. A foul burning smell from either blood or flesh reached her nose. Tesfia couldn’t comprehend what had happened. As blood splattered, Zepel collapsed with a cracking sound.

Tesfia held her breath to endure the pain and dropped her left hand. She carried out the swing of her katana with just her right hand. The man let go of his knife at that moment. He made a pinching gesture with his thumb and index finger and twisted it into Tesfia’s collarbone.

“Ack!!!”

The sound of her collarbone breaking reverberated through Tesfia’s whole body. Somehow, she managed to keep her grip on her katana, but the numbness in her right hand greatly reduced her grip strength.

Their way of fighting was too distinct. She relied fully on magic, and this man’s tactics were fundamentally different.

The pain turned her head into a jumbled mess, and her thoughts were incoherent. Next, fear and irritation set in. She had thought that her sense of justice, her sword, and her power would work against the cruel reality of the world.

When she had once faced a Fiend, she hadn’t succumbed to fear. She had protected her best friend, Alice, before the threat of its poisonous fangs. But the foundation of pride and confidence she had gained from that was starting to crumble.

The fear from the unimaginable malice and the threat of death from these polished killers was worse than what she had once overcome. Her soul felt bound and her legs paralyzed.

But even then...! she thought. Recovering her will, she instantly constructed an Icicle Sword above her. It was of course nothing but a rough-hewn lump of ice, but it was still the best choice in this situation.

She wanted to crack the thin smile of the enemy who stood before her convinced of his victory. While it didn't fly the way she aimed, the Icicle Sword crashed down right in front of her nose and successfully divided the two of them.

Tesfia believed she had managed to stop the deadly follow-up, but she saw something moving in the depths of the deep blue of the ice sword. In the next moment, she felt an impact from the side.

Splattered specks of blood fell on the Icicle Sword's surface and dripped down. She realized that blood was coming out of her mouth.

"Ugh, aaaahhhh!!!"

A pain unlike anything she'd ever felt before assaulted her left flank. When she looked down, she saw the man's right hand firmly grasping her flesh. The movement she had seen through the sword had been his thrusting hand.

Intense heat came from the man's hand, and parts of Tesfia's clothes burned. Tesfia thrust her hand at the man, but he didn't so much as budge. Instead, he put more power into his hand as if to tear the flesh to pieces.

Tesfia's vision blurred, and she saw the man's dark grin as he watched as her flesh burn. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead from a glancing blow from Icicle Sword, but the man paid it no heed.

Tesfia let out a low groan. The taste of blood filled her mouth, and it was difficult to even breathe. Even so, she forced herself on despite the pain, looking to cut off his wrist by swinging her katana back. That man had no choice but to pull back when he saw the slash. When he did, Tesfia dropped to her knees on the spot.

Dark blood poured out of the open hole in her flank, and there was a burning

stench. The sight was almost enough to paralyze her mind with pain and mental shock. It showed how powerless she really was.

Again, she hadn't had enough power...

Tesfia vacantly stared down at the ground as a trickle of blood ran down her mouth.



Alice was fighting against the bald earth magic user, and she had no leeway to look at how Tesfia was doing.

She was quite confident in her spearmanship, and she felt her skills had improved during her mock battles against Alus, yet she couldn't do anything but focus.

Even now, her rapidly thrust spear was casually brushed aside by the long weapon the man had created through earth magic. The weapon he was using looked very much like thin sticks twisted and intertwined together.

But when their weapons clashed, it sounded like metal against metal. The man was hardening his weapon through mana. Even with her golden spear, Shangdi Fides, there were many clashes where it was outmatched.

The man's skilled spear handling was slowly forcing Alice back.

The man leaned forward, wasting no time and delivering stabs, forcefully closing the distance to pressure the retreating Alice. If she didn't focus her very being, even the current balance she barely maintained would collapse.

Where the man was looking, how his muscles moved, the angle of his elbows, the position of his feet, even while analyzing all the information she could get, she was still at a disadvantage. Alice couldn't think of anyone this formidable aside from Alus. At this rate, she would eventually be cornered and find herself on the receiving end of a fatal blow.

Alice could sense that was gradually inching towards defeat, like she was being pushed towards a cliff's edge, and the anxiety showed on her face.

"It's almost a waste. You're pretty good. But, well, a brat never should have expected to beat an adult," he said. Despite the rapid thrusts, the man wasn't

struggling for breath in the slightest.

“J-Just because you’re an adult...” Alice desperately tried to retort but eventually fell silent.

Her breathing was thrown off rhythm because she’d forced herself to speak. She had been taking small breaths, but the slight lapse in focus had been all it took for her to struggle to breathe. As Alice hurriedly tried to take a deep breath, the man exploited the opening to rain down a violent string of thrusts.

Alice gasped and moved her golden spear to block them, but the man just smiled. “Whoever could’ve taught you, young lady? I never had a teacher like that. Oh how jealous I am.”

“Shut... Ugh!” As Alice tried to retort, the man’s spear grazed her. Blood splattered and soon started running down her cheek. In response, Alice focused on suppressing her emotions.

She brought her spear to the ground and blocked the next heavy attack. The man whistled, impressed, and then mercilessly followed up with multiple attacks. Alice was unable to read all of them. The best she could do was avoid any fatal hits.

“Miss, you’re looking to become a Magicmaster, aren’t ya? Then a serious injury to your arm will create problems in the future, won’t it? Your arm, your arm, your arm.”

The man’s spear thrusts became even sharper and faster. Alice held her golden spear in both hands to block the attacks, but then the tip of the opponent’s spear caught the skin between Alice’s fingers and tore it to shreds.

“Looks like it got your left hand instead,” he taunted.

Alice jumped far back and couldn’t help but let her left hand slump down. The area between her fingers had a deep tear, and blood ran down her fingers, dripping to the ground.

The man grinned and spun his spear, lazily letting it rest on his shoulder. His slumped posture made the spear look heavier than it was.

“Now then, you can’t use your left hand anymore. If you don’t get it checked

out, you might never use those fingers again. I bet you'll struggle as a Magicmaster like that too," the man said to provoke her. It was unclear if that was for tactical reasons or not, but in reality, Alice's defense had dulled and she was giving him an opening.

"Adults are scary, aren't they? If you survive, you might get it treated, but if you die, it will be for nothing. In fact, why not just try running away?" Beneath his grinning face lurked sadism and cruelty.

Alice's instincts told her not to turn her back on this man, no matter what. With her trembling right hand, Alice held the spear halfway up, trying to use it with a single hand. Doing so made her shudder when she exhaled.

I can't use Sirislate. He'll easily avoid my attacks unless I do something unexpected, she thought.

With the golden spear in hand, Alice used her arm to cover it as she secretly removed the rings from it and made them float.

Suddenly, the man turned a little wary of Alice, having perhaps sensed the fluctuation of her mana. However, that was only for a moment. After some time, the man seemed to think it was nothing, and the crude smile returned to his face.

"Is that some pointless trick you're planning? Ya just don't get it, kid. Oh, sorry about that. I haven't talked with anyone for a long time, so my mouth's got a little lonely."

"Hehe, are you sure you should be so casual about this?" Alice forced a smile as she continued moving the rings.

"Casual? You got that wrong. Well, since you're a student, let me teach you. Here, look at this..." The man pointed at a scar on his stomach. It was the remains of the first bit of damage he had taken from Alice when she'd pierced his wooden shield.

She didn't know what he was going to say, but cautiously watching the man, Alice intended to use this time to catch her breath.

"You won't kill an opponent through their stomach. A real adult aims here, get it?" the man said, pointing to his head with an ugly, mocking smile. "Fighting

a spear user who sticks to the textbook is so easy and boring. Do you still think this is some sort of mock battle with rules?”

He started laughing.

He was right on that point. If she had been using her spearmanship to kill and neutralize the enemy in a single attack, she should have aimed for a vital spot. Having the enemy point out her naivete made Alice bite her lip. She felt that was the primary reason she had no chance of winning this fight.

Alice looked down at her golden spear.

A Magicmaster’s greatest enemy was the Fiends. They didn’t polish their skills to turn them on people. So when faced against someone who trained to kill people, they found themselves lacking in resolve and technique.

The power to protect sounded more like lip service right now. Faced with an enemy who coldly aimed for her life, her resolve was dulled in comparison.

In the past, Alus had said his martial arts were self-taught. He made constant adjustments, striving to improve his efficiency, and Alus didn’t just have experience against Fiends but also against fighting people. As a result, the techniques he’d studied and refined for all possible angles had become truly unique to him.

Meanwhile, Alice was just polishing her spearmanship that fit the standard mold. She hadn’t added her own tricks to it, and there was no resolve in it. In the end, she was only capable of fighting nice-looking mock battles. Fighting a real battle against a villain that was used to killing was out of the question.

“Ya get it? If you can’t be ruthless against your enemy, don’t get involved.” With that, the man lowered his posture and readied his wooden spear, ready to end this battle.

As the man was about to step in, quiet screams came from the students who had been secretly watching the fighting. When Alice looked over, she saw a figure being thrown through the air from a heavy impact. Red hair fluttered and blood scattered... The body landed in front of the entrance to the main building and remained still.

When she saw that beat-up figure, Alice turned pale.

It was Tesfia, of all people. And the way she didn't even brace herself made it look like she was dead.

As Alice was left speechless, Tesfia's body suddenly shuddered and she groaned. Alice was relieved her friend was still alive, but only for a moment. Her face turned pale when she noticed a large pool of blood on the ground.

Tesfia's convulsive movements continued, and it was clear that she was seriously injured and on the verge of death.

"Fia!!!"

The cost of Alice taking her attention away from her enemy for a moment was high. The bald man stepped rapidly in and thrust his spear at a range too close to dodge.

"Reflec—"

Seeing the sharp thrust of the tree spear, Alice quickly tried to deploy magic while holding her golden spear. As the blade glowed, she tried to bring up her defense in time...but the spear pierced the base of her shoulder before she could manage.

"Ugh...!" An intense pain of flesh and bone being pierced assailed her, and she let a groan slip.

The man attempted to thrust the spear deeper, and she responded by wielding her spear in a single hand. However, it was not much more than an amateur wielding a branch and putting up a clumsy opposition.

Alice let out a magically enhanced thrust, which the man easily dodged. He kicked her chest—hard. The sound of her ribs breaking rang out, and her body was blown back. She crashed into the wall of a nearby building.

A shock of intense pain rippled through her back, and she felt the bones in her body creaking. She could feel blood run down from the back of her head to her neck. She tried to focus on the slowly approaching enemy through her blurry vision, but her consciousness was drifting away.

"Hmm? Did ya die? Well, no hard feelings, but just in case, I'll finish you off," the man said as he approached. His footsteps were the very sound of death

coming for her.

But suddenly, his gait was disturbed. He began to wobble and stagger as if he were drunk.

“Oh?” When the bald man looked down at his legs, he was surprised. “Hmm...so you sneakily aimed for my legs. But going for them just shows that you’re still just a kid.”

There was a deep wound in the man’s shin. Blood poured out, but he didn’t seem particularly concerned. If anything, he was a little exasperated that despite Alice’s desperate attack, she hadn’t aimed for the head.

Behind the shrugging man, a ring fell to the ground. The spear and rings of Shangdi Fides were made from the same material. And Alus had made it so that the rings could function as separate AWRs.

In exchange for getting kicked, Alice had cast Sirislate from the ring she’d slipped behind the man. While the attack from his blind spot had only manifested at a fifth of the ring’s usual power, it had accurately hit the man.

Despite his limping leg, the man continued hobbling towards her to finish the job, spinning his spear in his right hand before pointing the tip at Alice.

“With how big I am, it’s hard to miss. Yet why would you not aim to kill?” the man asked, looking down at Alice and holding his spear aloft.

After the man thrust it, the tip of the spear made from intertwining branches split and spread in three directions. But before Alice could see what effect that had, the wooden spear was cut to pieces.

The man stiffened. Wind had suddenly been created in front of him. “The hell is this?!” The bald attacker was taken aback by surprise, but a beat later, blood spurted out from all over his body. His body had been cut all over, and none of them were shallow.

Even his face was covered in blood. In preparation for the next attack, the man retreated behind a series of arching trunks he created as a shield. Even a follow-up attack shouldn’t have been able to break through that wooden shield.

But in the next moment, the cannonball of wind ripped up the wooden shield

and sent the man's body flying. The most he could do was use his arms to cover his face before he slammed into the nearby laboratory wall where he was cruelly crushed. It was like a red flower had bloomed on the wall.

"So I was late. This is horrible...!" a figure muttered in lamentation, slowly landing next to Alice with a gust of wind.

Sisty's expression was filled with regret. Her face and clothes were splattered with blood. She had arrived at the scene after dealing with other intruders, but the carnage had already begun.

After glancing at Tesfia and Alice, Sisty glared at the attackers, who were readying themselves at the appearance of the former Single. Dante alone stood out from the crowd as unconcerned, but Sisty just raised her staff and readied for battle.

"Principal, I'm sorry. I couldn't protect the two..." Senniat said with tears in her eyes.

"No, you held up well. Ms. Senniat, please take care of Ms. Alice. I will handle the rest," she gently urged, sensing Senniat's concern.

"Y-Yes, ma'am! I won't fail this time." Senniat firmly nodded, then ran over to Alice.

Alice's shoulder injury was grave, and she would need to be checked by a healing Magicmaster quickly.

Sisty calmly looked around to get a grasp of the situation. The male teacher was still alive, but the guard next to him was dead. Moreover...

Ms. Tesfia is in a bad state. She needs to be taken to a healing Magicmaster as soon as possible, she thought. However, the attackers likely wouldn't just look on as she walked all that distance.

"The injured and medical personnel have evacuated to the dorms, so take her there," Sisty said.

Then she looked at Dante and the attackers again. She was trembling with anger. She forced her expression to stay calm, and she glared at the villains

before her.

In the next moment, wind started blowing as vast amounts of mana flared up from within her body. The magic towers around then began to glow and shake. The mana within them had been used up a little after the Godma incident, but there was still a massive amount left, and it was now gathering around her body.

“How dare you harm this Institute and the people in it...! Don’t think you will get out of this alive!” she yelled.

The raging mana became a storm that surrounded Sisty. Her staff-type AWR glowed, waiting for the mana within her to be unleashed.

She exuded such overwhelming pressure that for each step she took forwards, the attackers slowly retreated. Yet some fearless attackers still approached her. One jumped at her with a battle cry and wielding a great hammer.

Their mana gathered in the hammer before turning into minerals surrounding the hammer, more than doubling its size. As the massive hammer approached from above, another two attackers attacked from behind. Completely concealing their presence, they had closed in on Sisty in an instant, and their daggers flashed.

Making the first move with the intent to kill would create a fatal opening and be very efficient against people who hadn’t fully resolved themselves, like Tesfia and Alice. But with her expression unchanged, Sisty slammed her staff into the ground.

Saplings broke through the cobblestone pavement, and branches immediately stretched out and tied up the two attackers. Mana flowed into the branches, making them grow rapidly, which in turn made them clamp tight around the men and crush them. Their anguished screams rang out as the approaching hammer above Sisty cast a big shadow on the ground.

The hammer, which had grown to the size of a small hut, was swung down at Sisty and the other two attackers at a frightening speed. But just before it landed, the ultra-hard great hammer was cut into pieces and the metal fragments crumbled down.

Sisty could see the man's astonished expression. And without any change in her expression at all, Sisty swung her arm in front of her. That was enough to easily blow away the metal fragments and the man. He sped through the air and out of the Institute before slamming into the ground and losing consciousness.

Having easily taken care of three attackers, Sisty began slowly walking forward again. Meanwhile, the two attackers who had had their bones crushed were slowly dragged into a hole in the ground by the branches, cleaning up after her.

The overwhelming difference in strength seemed to make the attackers shudder. However, instead of trying to kill Sisty, they turned their madness to the hostages. One of them reached out for a nearby female student.

But just before he could grab her, blood spurted from where his fingertips had been scraped off. A barrier of golden wind formed around the hostages, protecting them against the evil.

"It will be impossible for the likes of you to break through that barrier," Sisty said.

The suffering man strongly held his other hand. She had successfully managed to isolate the hostages from the attackers. All that was left was to eliminate the rest of the villains.

"So, what are you after?" she quietly asked Dante after a moment, but that question contained her unabated anger.

"I see the title of Witch is not just for show. But you're underestimating us a little too much," Dante responded.

A sidelong glance from Dante's maniacal eyes gave Sisty a momentary sense of dread. He slowly held out his hand and flicked his wrist.

Sisty was speechless. Sisty looked over to her barrier and found an impossible scene playing out before her. The barrier of wind, *Ligra Litas*, could automatically repair itself from the mana Sisty had stored as its source to infinitely create a wall of wind without any input needed from her.

Yet, she could hear the students scream. *Ligra Litas* began to slow down like

the wind had mass. The golden wind had lost its momentum, and its edge had dulled to the point that she could vaguely see the students beyond it.

“What did you do?!” she unintentionally blurted out. It was a phenomenon that was difficult for even a former Single like her to understand.

“The hostages remain hostages. Either you remove the wall of wind, or I do it by force. But I can’t really hold back, so don’t complain if everyone inside gets killed in the process,” Dante said.

Sisty glared at Dante, but there was only one thing she could do. As she dispelled the barrier and the golden wind dispersed, the students collapsed to the ground, moaning in agony.

“A wise decision. We already had an insurance policy, just in case you showed up,” Dante declared with a fearless smile and pointed at a corner of the collapsed main building.

A few figures walked into view from the rubble on the third and fourth floors of the exposed main building.

“You have more hostages?!”

Sisty’s gaze sharpened, and Dante spoke with ease. “That’s right. So don’t put up any pointless resistance. Well, you could just get everyone caught and fill the student registry with the names of the dead if you want. Now then, for your next educational decision... Who will die and who will live. Pick who’s going to drop out.”

Sisty raised her eyebrows as two students and a staff member with their hands restrained and ropes around their necks were pushed forward. They were made to stand at the edge of the building, high off the ground.

Behind them were a woman and two subordinates. With one order from Dante, they would push the hostages off and hang them.

“Principal Sisty...” the female staff member said, voice trembling. It was the guide who had given a disguised Mir a tour around the campus.

Considering her pale face, Sisty felt she was most likely just calling out her name instead of asking for help.

“As you can see, our preparations are perfect. Oh and you asked about what I was after? Of course, who would do something like this without a reason? But, if you’re gonna ask people something, you should put your weapon away first, don’t you think?” Dante asked.

Mana poured out of his body as he showed her a hideous grin. His mana was about the same amount as Sisty’s. No, if not for the magic towers, his exceeded hers.

He’s on the level of an active-duty Single. But what was that spell before...?

Sisty analyzed her enemy’s capabilities. If they fought, the entire Institute would no doubt be caught up. Not to mention, there was a fathomless part of him. Considering the bloodlust and techniques of his subordinates, this man was probably very skilled at fighting people too. Sisty’s area of expertise was defense and fighting Fiends. Former Single or not, she was anxious about fighting in anything other than a pure magical battle.

And then there were the hostages.

Sisty realized it in an instant. If she was going to keep casualties to a minimum, there was next to nothing she could do. And as the principal of the Institute, she could never put the lives of the students second.

But most of all, she had a time limit. Tesfia was seriously injured, and if left as she was for much longer, she could die. So any further resistance was...

Sisty reluctantly lowered her staff and pulled back the mana covering her body, showing that she had no intention to fight.

Seeing that, Dante grinned. “Good girl. Now then, I am after Minerva. So hand it over.”

While her eyes opened wide, Sisty gnashed her teeth.

Minerva was the world’s greatest AWR, which had been unveiled to the public during the last Friendship Magical Tournament. It was the strongest AWR—mankind’s treasure. Since keeping it in one place for too long was considered dangerous, it was randomly rotated among the seven nations.

Incidentally, after the tournament, the Second Magical Institute had been

chosen to store it. However, that information was top secret, with only the very tops of the nations knowing about it.

So how could this attacker know?

Sisty had no choice but to feign ignorance and responded after a pause. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dante raised his arm in response, and Mir put her foot on the back of the female staff member, who just barely managed to keep herself from falling. Pieces of rubble fell down to the ground below.

“Well, we have three of them. Feel free to keep quiet while two of them hang,” said Dante.

“Fine. In exchange, I want you to guarantee the lives of those students and staff members. That’s my condition,” countered Sisty.

“Do you understand your position? No deal. For now we can release the wounded. And once you’ve thrown away that dangerous AWR, you’ll guide us to where it’s kept hidden.”

Sisty reluctantly nodded and threw away her staff.

“A good decision,” said Dante. “Then let’s go...but don’t be too slow, or the guys staying behind might get bored and kill some of the students for fun.”

“Before that, promise me that nobody else will be hurt after you get your hands on Minerva! I won’t move from this place until the hostages are released,” the principal insisted.

“Well, fine. The wounded will be released ahead of time, but that’s as far as I will go,” said Dante. “You might give the teachers some orders to make a move on us after all. Some of the upperclassmen will carry out the injured. But those three over there will stay until I have Minerva.”

The attackers were more concerned about the teachers who could potentially be a threat. Having no other choice, Sisty obeyed Dante and ordered some students to carry out the injured. They were instructed to go to the dorms that had become a designated evacuation area.

Despite her efforts to free as many as possible, there were still over fifty

students and staff members being held hostage. She could see the students watching as the injured supported each other and evacuated.

Senniat rushed over to Tesfia and bit her lip. When she saw Dante looking her way, his intimidating presence caused her to look down at the ground. He wordlessly walked towards her.

For a moment, tension ran sky high. Senniat had positioned herself between him and Tesfia. However, she was like a stone by the side of the road; he didn't pay her any attention whatsoever. His sole focus was the main building.

But as he walked past Tesfia, her bloodstained hand grabbed his pant leg, her fingers weakly gripping it. She seemed to have done so unconsciously.

This caused Dante to stop and look down at the redheaded girl who lay on the ground with her unfocused eyes open. She was in a pool of her own blood and practically unconscious...but it seemed like she was trying to stop an attacker from infiltrating the Institute even now. Or perhaps she had been trying to prevent him from reaching Senniat.

Sisty felt her heart squeeze at the sight of the seriously injured redheaded girl still trying to resist.

Tesfia was gasping for breath. Her resistance was feeble, and she lacked the strength to even raise her head. All she could do was grab Dante's clothes as he passed by, which wasn't enough to stop him.

But in the next moment, cold air flowed from Tesfia's hand and froze Dante's pant leg.

The bizarre freezing effect instantly made the fearless man cautious and he forced himself forward. Dante ruled the attackers like a king. Sisty's Ligma Litas hadn't fazed him. Yet he felt the need to shake free from the blood-soaked hand of this severely injured girl, feeling an indescribable pressure from her unfathomable power.

Ice magic wasn't enough to make Dante's blood run cold. Simple magic...especially that from a student, should have been insignificant to him. Yet he moved to eliminate her before he could even think. With movements far faster than the speed of the freezing, he raised a mana-clad fist.

It was a brief clash between the freezing of life and the harvesting of life.

Before Dante's merciless fist could reach Tesfia's skull, he stopped mid-swing. Behind him, he sensed Sisty's mana about to burst, getting ready to fight him. If he killed this girl, the Witch would probably lose herself with rage. And their deal would break down completely.

It would be a fierce battle, with the winner determined by which side still had somebody left alive.

That wasn't what Dante wanted at the moment. He might be a tyrannical king, but he wasn't foolish. Besides, if they got into a major fight, and the military were to catch notice, they wouldn't be able to get Minerva out of the Institute even if they found it.

With a snort, Dante lowered his fist and coldly looked down at the tattered girl, who was still gasping for breath. The hand he'd shaken off was lying unmoving on the ground. The cloth itself fell off as Tesfia's final freezing magic disappeared.

Dante turned around and sighed.

"Don't worry. If I lost it this easily, I wouldn't have done something like this," Dante said without expression and began walking again. Behind him, Mir, who had entrusted the three hostages to her subordinates, followed, having jumped down the building.

Senniat, with beads of sweat on her forehead picked up Tesfia, the last of the injured. With some help from others, the injured were successfully evacuated.

"I've held up my end of the deal. Now it's your turn," said Dante.

There were still hostages. Only the bare minimum, the wounded, had been released. But the situation was still highly unpredictable.

Sisty wordlessly nodded and walked towards where Minerva was being stored, as he wanted. The only saving grace to this situation was that she was taking the most dangerous man away from this location. No matter how furious she was about the situation, the lives at stake were invaluable to her.



With Sisty at the front and Dante and Mir behind her, the three entered the main building.

“Say, Dante. This woman killed quite a few of the others,” said Mir.

“So it seems. I picked some guys that were pretty useful, but I guess it was inevitable against the Witch. Well, at least they served the purpose of luring out our guide,” said Dante.

“Ah, I see.” Sensing what Dante meant, Mir shook her head once in exasperation.

The prisoners that had escaped together glared at the witch for what she’d done to their allies, but Dante was unperturbed. To him, they were nothing more than scattered bait. He’d had them run rampant all over the Institute to enrage Sisty Nexophia because she knew where Minerva was.

“To think you’d use your allies as sacrificial pawns. How scary,” said Mir. “Also, aren’t you being a little rough with how you use people? You even made me infiltrate the Institute under a fake name for a preliminary investigation. And in the end, I didn’t find out anything useful anyways.”

“Well, I’m sure it helped you understand the layout a little. Not to mention, you were able to secure some new hostages, so it wasn’t all that bad.”

“I suppose so.” Mir shrugged at Dante.

While they talked, Sisty walked with heavy steps. She’d never imagined she’d be guiding intruders to Minerva. She had entertained the idea that she might be able to turn the tables on Dante alone...but his composure made her imagine there was a clear gap between them. Even without her AWR, he was still cautious of her, which became a psychological barrier for her.

This villain, who exceeded a former Single like herself, was nothing short of a nightmare to Sisty. And the situation was even worse with the suspicious woman who reeked of perfume tagging along with him.

She’d have loved to buy some time, but that likely wouldn’t be successful. Even if reinforcements from the military arrived, they didn’t know how many attackers were in the Institute, and they might even have more hostages somewhere. Once a battle began, students would get caught up.

But if Alus were to appear...

Despite imagining that, Sisty's outlook remained cloudy. She felt there would still be casualties even if Alus showed up. The leader of the attackers behind her was tremendously skilled. While it had been quite some time since she'd left the front, she couldn't see the depths of his abilities. She didn't even know who would win if he fought Alus.

"Mir, you said you heard from the agent sent by that noble that the current rank 1 was in the Institute, didn't you?" Dante asked. Sisty was startled by him so casually mentioning top secret information.

She couldn't believe how large their information network was. It seemed that Dante was entirely fearless, not even fearing the greatest Magicmaster a little.

"Yes, but I didn't like the informant's attitude, so I killed them. I did try to take care of the rank 1 ahead of time, but unfortunately it seems the ones I sent after him were wiped out," said Mir.

"That was pointless. They wouldn't stand a chance no matter how skilled they were. Fortunately it seemed Suzar managed to pull him away. Hey, Witch, how good is the rank 1?" asked Dante.

"Who knows exactly? But you're only alive because he's not here," Sisty bluntly said as she continued walking. She felt a little anxious because she had enemies right behind her, but then she heard the woman behind her stifle a laugh.

"Heh, I wonder how good the rank 1 is on the surface. Playing around with magic against Fiends and thinking he's king of the hill is nothing short of comical," said Mir.

"Oh, he's exceptional against people too. From what I hear, those you sent after him haven't returned," responded Sisty.

"So it seems. Do you feel refreshed now? I hear that you get less attached to your life as you age," Mir replied. Her tone was cheerful, but the atmosphere between the two women suddenly became a lot fiercer.

"Mir, the rank 1 here doesn't just work on the surface; he also works in the shadows. He's already taken out Nox. It seems he's being given a lot of behind-

the-scenes jobs involving politics of the seven nations. I bet he's fed up with it too," said Dante.

"Nox?!" Mir muttered the name and ground her teeth before calming down somewhat. "Hmm, that's interesting. Speaking of Singles, I'd love to get a look at Rusalca's scion. We're going to kill him eventually right?"

"Who knows? If he shows up, you probably won't enjoy it. But there aren't many who could stand up to us when it comes to killing," said Dante.

"And one of those is the rank 1. Heh heh."

While enduring Mir's laugh, Sisty detoured through the main building to the staff side entrance. They continued walking until they reached the courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard was a giant slate commemorating the founding of the Institute, and it was positioned in a way that blocked the view of the area from any of the surrounding windows.

"What are you doing? Don't stop," demanded Dante.

"Don't be in such a rush. Just wait a moment."

Sisty slowly walked up to the slate and poured mana into it. The mana glowed red and ran through the grooves in the slate like blood, making the whole thing glow faintly. In the next moment, the slate sank into the ground and revealed a staircase leading down.

"Oh...! I see I wasn't going to find it so easily even by infiltrating the Institute." Mir whistled, impressed.

"It's this way," Sisty said and walked down the stairs, Dante and Mir following behind her. As they walked down the long staircase, the lights automatically turned on. Eventually they reached the equivalent of a fifth basement floor.

A wide space opened up before them. While it wasn't as large as the training grounds, it was over half the size of it and surrounded by stone walls with several pillars that looked like the magic towers. Each of them was made of a special magic material and had a circumference of around four meters.

The magnificent view made Mir reevaluate the value of the treasure that awaited them. Dante stared intently at the pillars.

“Hmm, there’s magical formulas on each of these pillars. Even if you don’t understand the true value of the treasure, you at least get it to some degree. That said, you’ve just stored it away and carefully poke and prod it with incomplete knowledge. The treasure ahead is still in perfectly working order, but you have to use it instead of treating it like some valuable gem,” he said.

“Minerva is the oldest AWR in human history! Do you know something more about it...? No, that can’t be possible!” Sisty lashed out in a furious tone.

If stolen, Minerva was certainly a valuable treasure. After all, in the history of study of the ancient magical civilization, it was said to be the oldest of its kind. As for its functions, there were still a lot of mysteries around it.

Incidentally, the knowledge gained from studying Minerva and applied in general-purpose armaments resulted in the first prototype for AWRs. In other words, Minerva was the mother of all AWRs, and no doubt one of humanity’s greatest treasures.

That was why Sisty had been under the impression that this tyrannical man couldn’t know anything about Minerva aside from its value.

Dante twisted his lips into a grin. “Yeah, it’s impossible, isn’t it? How could some thug know something when all of the bigwig scholars can’t figure anything out after putting their heads together...heh heh.”

Despite all of their efforts to study it, the scholars hadn’t understood much about it. Even the prototypes of AWRs had been the result of just barely understanding one side of it.

Dante’s phrasing boggled Sisty’s mind. She fell silent after that and pushed on ahead. After leaving the open space, they walked through a narrow hallway for thirty meters before reaching a large double door.

Once opened, the world’s oldest AWR would lay in front of this dangerous man.

It would have been better if it was just a powerful AWR. Then it would just be a piece of equipment for Magicmasters.

And if Dante was just a thief looking to sell it off for money, the situation would be even simpler. But based on what he’d said, it was very likely that he

knew something about the seven nations' ancient treasure.

The man was still unfathomable, and further unknown power might come into his grasp. Understanding that this might be the worst possible situation, Sisty couldn't surrender it to him. And if possible, she didn't want to even let him touch it.

I guess it was wishful thinking to hope this situation would sort itself out if Alus came. I will have to find an opening...! thought Sisty.

A few seconds after Sisty resolved herself, they came to stand before a two-and-a-half-meter-large door. The steel door had a magic formula engraved in it just like the slate above.

"Get on with it already. Or do you want more bodies to pile up?" Dante asked, not even giving her a chance to hesitate.

Sisty put her hand on the door and poured her mana into it, which served as a password, and shortly thereafter they heard mechanical sounds and the door began to open.

As Dante was about to step in, he paused, then turned around and said, "Mir, you go get rid of the rat tailing us."

"Okay, you don't mind if I kill them, do you? I've waited forever for your sign and I've been so bored the entire time."

Dante just waved as if to tell her to get going already before entering the tightly locked room with Sisty. As the heavy door closed, Mir slowly turned around. "To think you could tail us this perfectly. Are we in the same line of business perhaps?" Mir asked cheerfully, staring at a single point in the dark hallway.

In response, the space behind one of the pillars supporting the hallway wavered. Eventually, a figure appeared like a shadow peeling itself free from the pillar.

When she saw the figure, Mir looked surprised. "You're awfully young. A student perhaps? Who are you? Still, you won't make for a good playmate. I'm not the kind that can be satisfied with hide-and-seek, you know?"

“Ha ha, and you are first-class criminal, Mir Ostayka. I won’t give my name to a crude woman, but I’ll have you know that I’m pretty good at hide-and-seek myself. Maybe I’ll run away now,” Felinella Socalent said with a fearless smile.

She was also a bit relieved. She hadn’t been entirely convinced when Exceles Lilyusem had told her that the Institute was under attack; she’d suspected it was an excuse for them to shake her off, but she couldn’t ignore the detailed evidence Exceles had presented.

Ultimately, her coming all this way hadn’t been a waste of time. Her only blunder had been getting noticed. When facing this killer, she couldn’t help but be aware of their difference in skill, whether she liked it or not.

As expected of the group from the fourth layer of the Trojan Prison. She’s not someone I can escape from easily, thought Felinella. She felt a chill run down her spine just from facing this woman.

She immediately drew the AWR at her waist and readied herself for battle. She hadn’t been overconfident in her covert abilities, but the underground space might have made her miss her chance to quit.



“Oh, now how would you know my name, young lady? Not to mention your hiding skills and familiarity with your AWR. It seems you’re quite the honors student.” Mir’s heels clacked against the ground as she elegantly closed the distance. She had the composed smile of an adult playing with a child.

But Felinella replied with a soft smile of her own. “Oh, there is no need for a vulgar old woman making a mess of someone else’s home to pay me any respect. So I bid you to go home to where you belong—Trojan Prison.”

Mir’s shoulders trembled, and she ground her teeth. Felinella quickly picked up on the change and gave her even more kind advice, covering her nose while she spoke. “Also, this is hard to say, but that perfume you have on stinks. I hear that the elderly eventually, you know, smell, so I guess it’s inevitable. Frankly, because it’s so overpowering, it was really easy to follow you.”

“You’re just too young to understand, you brat,” Mir spat out. “Sheesh, it seems kids these days are well developed, but their brains don’t get any nutrients!”

Mana began to flow from Mir, and while Felinella feigned composure, she felt like her heart was being squeezed. According to the information she had, Mir Ostayka had been confined in the fourth layer of the Trojan Prison.

Supposedly, the deeper the layer, the more heinous the criminals. So Felinella wondered how deep the fourth layer was. It hadn’t been hard to imagine that this woman had been able to kill many people with her abilities. But now that she was face-to-face with her, Felinella found that Mir far exceeded her imagination. The mana reaching her was so dense, she felt like she was going to be swallowed up.

That amount of mana puts her on the level of a Double Digit Magicmaster...and in the upper ranks, at that! The problem is...

Felinella breathed shallowly and gulped, sending moisture and air into her drying throat. After one bigger gulp, Felinella faced her opponent with the intent of using every last bit of the mana she had.

If it was a Double Digit Magicmaster that she was dealing with, she might have managed something. But the person in front of her was a magical criminal

who specialized in killing, which was the biggest problem. She was a different breed from Magicmasters who specialized in fighting Fiends, so a Magicmaster's rank was unreliable here.

On the surface, Mir was a beautiful woman, but who knew what kind of poisonous fang she was hiding. In a sense, Exceles's information had ended with Felinella drawing the short straw.

She slowly slid her feet, measuring the range. However, Mir paid no heed to such things, and she calmly walked closer, one step at a time. The moment her toes passed a certain line, Felinella's lips curled up into a smile.

Felinella's AWR was a stabbing weapon that was exceptional when it came to taking the initiative against the enemy. On top of that, her initial attack was boosted, causing it to rapidly accelerate. Only somebody very skilled would be able to handle such an attack without falling behind.

Her attack had enough speed and power to punch through Mir's chest, but Mir evaded it with a dance-like movement. The tip of Felinella's rapier merely grazed her side, and their eyes met for an instant in the heat of the moment.

Mir's well-manicured nails thrust towards Felinella's neck. However, Felinella's bent left arm appeared from the shadow of her right arm, in a blind spot for Mir, the light of wind magic glowing in her palm.

Neither changed their expression.

In an instant, the advanced wind attribute Rond Ragd formed in Felinella's palm and the mana gathered there was condensed. A narrow tornado extended from her palm towards Mir to directly hit her.

However...with a slight feeling that something was wrong, Felinella vigilantly observed her opponent.

Rond Ragd, which had attacked Mir with a roar that shook the hallway, suddenly lost its momentum and turned into a soft breeze. Behind it stood Mir, an arm up in the air. She held a rather large folding fan-shaped AWR with thin, special metal blades between its spines. But the most astounding thing was that a single wave of the fan had erased an advanced-level spell.

Felinella furrowed her brow, and Mir spoke up. "Using close combat as a

distraction to fire magic? Is the rat trying to bite the cat? What a dirty trick! This is why I hate narrow-minded brats' fighting style!"

"I'll show you who the rat really is."

Despite a cold sweat, Felinella put on a brave front. Even as her spell had failed, she hadn't forgotten to prepare her next move. Her instincts were telling her to never stop no matter what happened.

Wind spinning like drills was suddenly created in all four directions above Mir, angled diagonally towards her and ready to thrust like spears.

"«*Femme de Rossa*»!"

Felinella spread her hands and swung them down. The winds violently whirled to close in on Mir, but Mir leaped back and took cover behind one of the pillars. The four winds followed, and dazzling sparks flew as the wind scraped against metal.

Of course, the pillars were made out of special metal that wouldn't collapse easily, and though the surface was chipped away, there was no sign of it collapsing at all.

A few seconds later, sharp winds came from the shadow of the pillar and blew against her, causing Felinella to cover her face with an arm. Mir stepped out from behind the pillar.

"That pillar sure was dusty," she said, coughing. "I hate wind magic; it always messed up my hair...huh?" Mir covered her mouth with her fan and looked down at her thigh, noticing a red line across it. "Ah...how dare you scratch my skin. I won't let you off after just torturing you a little now. Besides, just the fact that you're young pisses me off."

Felinella braced herself as she was bombarded with Mir's bloodlust. If she had just been a normal student who wasn't used to this kind of violence, her knees would have given away in an instant. However, Felinella's *Femme de Rossa* was an advanced-level spell that constructed multiples of the intermediate-level spell *Femme Rihal*, and it had been fired from a blind spot too...

Not even that works?! And on top of that, Mir Ostayka uses wind magic like me... This is bad, thought Felinella.

Even when fighting someone with the same attribute, there were usually many branches to choose from. But when it came to wind magic, there was very little variation in its offensive spells. That meant that both sides could easily read the other's moves, making it difficult to get off a surprise attack to overcome the difference in skill.

Felinella had thought her surprise attack was successful, so she was secretly panicking. Meanwhile, Mir's glossy lips parted as she spoke without a hint of frustration. "Hmm, I thought I had a pretty comprehensive understanding of wind magic, but it seems there've been quite a few new developments. Well, it's not much more than a student's tricks... More importantly, did you know?" Mir asked, her perfume reaching Felinella. "When the skin is cut open, it's difficult to heal. In particular, when there are several long cuts over a small area, you need a pretty good healing Magicmaster to get it back to normal. Which means that there are cuts all over that pretty face of yours, there's going to be some real scarring! When you get a good look in the hospital, you might be surprised to find yourself transformed into an old hag with wrinkles all over your face!"

With a thin smile on her face, Mir brought her fan down. Felinella tried to dodge by reflex, but her cheek was cut, and the blood created a red curtain going down her white skin.

It was an invisible attack created by magic, and it was clear as day that it was skillfully concealed and as sharp as a blade, even though the low use of mana meant that it was unlikely to cause a fatal blow with a single attack.

"Ha ha, the prejudice of an old woman is unsightly. I suppose it's envy from the fact that you won't be able to hide those crow's feet any longer."

Felinella's taunt earned her a glare from Mir, who launched another invisible attack against her. Felinella crossed her arms in front of her face and stepped out of the way as fast as she could while activating the spell she'd secretly prepared. She rode the wind to move across the space between them.

Felinella kicked off walls and pillars to accelerate, her body lightened by the magic, and closed in on Mir. It was a measure to prevent her opponent from accurately targeting her, and fortunately, this place wasn't lacking in objects to

use.

“Shitty brat...that’s enough.”

Mir shook her fan and forcibly changed the air current. That threw off Felinella’s wind riding and slowed down her movements for a moment. Mir grinned and shut her fan.

Looking down at her feet, Felinella spotted a translucent rope made of wind wrapped around her. With a tug, her legs were pulled out from under her and she was slammed into the ground. She hit the hard floor and bounced off it like a rubber ball. The air was forced out of her lungs and intense pain assaulted her.

Looking at her feet again, she saw that the wind rope reached all the way to Mir’s fan. It was less a rope and more of a whip. Despite the pain in her back, Felinella reached down and ripped off the wind, struggling to breathe.

Yet she felt her legs pulled again, and her body floated in the air as she was pulled up. Her head was sent back and forth like a leaf in the wind.

Unable to control the directions her body flew in, she was helplessly swung into walls and pillars. She tried to protect her vitals with her arms, but unable to fully do so, blood ran down her injured forehead and wet her black hair. Eventually...the blood-soaked hair began to draw a red line across the ground like a brush.

As a finishing blow, Felinella was slammed into the ground hard—she stopped moving. Her consciousness began to fade, and even the AWR she’d kept a firm grasp on slipped from her hand.

“Hah, is that all you’ve got after all that lip you gave me? This is why I hate brats...you just stop on your own without even entertaining me,” Mir spat out. She undid the whip of wind, and approached the prone Felinella.

The moment her footsteps stopped, Felinella’s fingers moved, grabbing a hold of her AWR. She kicked as she stood up. Her collapse had been a deception to create a single opening that would be her only chance of victory. Despite the serious damage, she’d staked it all on this moment.

Mir quickly crossed her arms in front of herself to block the kick. Not even

giving that a glance, Felinella thrust her AWR at her enemy's chest with all of her might.

However...Mir just barely dodged the attack as it scraped past her chest.

But now that I'm this close...! thought Felinella. At some point, Felinella had switched her AWR to her nondominant hand. Her center of gravity was much further forward than usual, and while Mir had dodged the attack, she was now next to Felinella.

Felinella followed up by thrusting her dominant hand by her hip. The wind in her palm began spinning around.

«*Tempest!*» She shouted the spell name in her mind, and it should have had enough power to neutralize the enemy before her. Yet, despite only slight resistance, the destructive winds turned into a gentle wind that drifted between her fingers.

Felinella's eyes opened wide...and she saw Mir with her own hand thrust out, mirroring her. She'd even replicated her desperate twist of the wrist. The spells had canceled each other out.

Mir had used the same amount of mana to create the same power and given it the same amount of rotation. She'd even perfectly matched the timing. And that wasn't all.

“«*Tempest!*»”

Of all things, Mir's other hand was touching Felinella's solar plexus when it unleashed a second spell. The impact shook Felinella's body. Her bones creaked and her lungs nearly collapsed. She was sent flying and slammed against the floor repeatedly as she rolled. Finally, she slammed into one of the pillars and stopped.

Her vision was bloodied, and she wasn't even sure if she was breathing properly. Before she could consider the concept of defeat, she instinctively realized she could no longer move.

“Ah ha ha ha... You really are weak. If you had been a little more considerate with your choice of words, I would have killed you a bit more skillfully.” Mir looked across at the girl with a sigh. Then her face went blank again, like her

expression had been shaved off.

The conclusion had come sooner than expected, and Mir seemed a little dissatisfied. She had plenty of ways of killing her prey, but in the end, she hadn't been able to choose one of them.

She purposefully chose not to rob Felinella of her consciousness or life, thinking that it'd be more fun torturing the impudent girl while she waited for Dante, playing a game where she kept Felinella on the verge of death.

But when the skirmish came to an end, that plan went up in smoke, and the only thing that remained was the slight pain from the injury on her thigh.

"I'd just get dirty if I tore you apart, and there's no point in cutting your body into small pieces and hiding them. But now that you're dead, I have nothing to do," Mir said with a sigh to Felinella's prone form. But then she saw Felinella's legs slide weakly across the floor. "Oh, you're still alive? This is no good. Normally, that would have finished you off...but perhaps my skills have really dulled," she muttered.

She watched with disgust as Felinella desperately tried to stand up. "I hate brats. They're just as hard to kill as cockroaches."

Pulling out her fan-shaped AWR, Mir walked up to Felinella, grabbed her hair, and pulled her up so she could look into her eyes. "Die, you shitty brat."

Felinella's vacant eyes met Mir's...and suddenly the air around Felinella rustled and a slight change occurred to her clothes. Her bloodstained dress was clad in wind and particles of light that weren't too different from magical light burst forth.

A clear outline of something appeared in the air, and Mir was knocked away by the gust of wind. She backed off further in surprise. She looked down at her hand and found several shallow cuts that she hadn't noticed before.

Tsk, what is she doing now...? The woman thought, staring in irritation at Felinella. At some point, the wind around Felinella had taken on a pearl-gray color. *What is going on?! That does it. I'm going to tear her limb from limb so she can't ever do anything again!*

With a cruel light in her eyes, Mir was about to attack Felinella again, when

suddenly a chill gave her goose bumps. The nature of the wind around Felinella's body had clearly changed. The air itself tingled with tension.

“What the hell are you?!” Mir's eyes stopped on Felinella's face. “Th-Those eyes and this nature of mana! Could it be? Your name! Tell me your name!”

Felinella's lips moved ever so slightly, and she quietly spoke. “...Soca...lent... It's Felinella Socalent.”

“Wha—?!” Mir was visibly taken aback by what she heard. Her expression twisted, and she brought her fingers to her face as if to confirm the shape of her mouth. “I see, I see now... You're his daughter! But what is that?! What is it?!” Mir looked like she'd lost her will to fight and couldn't help but shout at Felinella.

Before she knew it, Felinella's appearance had completely changed. The pure wind cloaked her body, making her look like a heavenly maiden, her fluttering hems a brilliant white. The clothes she'd been wearing flapped in the wind, and a thin veil the color of innocence was draped above them.

Faced with an impossible sight, Mir cursed the girl with trembling lips. “Hah, what the hell is that! This is why I hate kids. What are you trying to be, some sort of bride on a bloodstained battlefield! So that's just some kind of illusion you've created as the last spell you'll cast in your life!”

Despite her words, Mir felt that the very air had turned pure, like it was blessing Felinella. It was like it was blowing away the malice Mir was clad in. When the dress was finally complete, it revealed a flawless and pure wedding dress.

The outfit ultimately was just the embodiment of the desire in the depths of Felinella's consciousness. So while it was made of her own mana, it was in no way the optimal shape for combat.

And beneath it, she was still bleeding. However, it didn't stain the dress, so it could still be considered a combat uniform. The elegant dress, fluttering in the wind, retained its unique shape with edges that flowed as if melting in the air, as if to confirm that it was indeed composed of the last of her mana and created at the risk of death.

Then, with somewhat unsteady but powerful steps Felinella walked forward. The winds blew and Mir naturally took a few steps back.

“I don’t have...much time. So I will at least...finish you off,” said Felinella.

“You brat, don’t get full of yourself!” Mir shouted and swung her fan up.

Immediately, countless blades of wind assailed Felinella; however, Felinella responded by swinging her arm in front of her. That was all it took for the blades to slide off of her like she was wearing armor. In the end, all they accomplished was scratching up the pillars.

“Tsk! You’re nothing but trash! How dare you oppose meeee!” An enormous amount of mana leaked out of Mir’s body as her eyes opened wide, Felinella’s magic dress still sounding an alarm in Mir’s head.

Felinella let out a long, drawn-out breath as she held out her right hand. A globe with wind magic contained within was created in her palm. It wasn’t swirling violently—instead, it was like a calm breeze, slowly flowing through the globe—but with each passing moment, powerful tornadoes extended from all parts of the sphere.

It absorbed all kinds of mana in the room and began to dance in a frenzy. Anyone who could use the wind attribute could tell from a glance that it was like a manifestation of a raging storm itself.

“Hey, what is that magic? I don’t know it... I have never seen it...! A-Are you going to kill me? Is that your plan? I-I know it might be a little late, but...maybe I can just apologize?” Mir muttered in a low voice. She no longer had any expression on her face.

“—I will kill you.”

Hearing that, Mir poured all the mana she could into her fan as a last stand. She pulled her arm back, pulling wind back with her, and gathered it all around. She shouted, “You’re the one who’s going to die! <<*Uanea*>>!”

The pillars shook; the ceiling and walls creaked. A violent wind pressure filled the room and dominated the surrounding area. Despite facing such dangerous winds, Felinella didn’t budge. She just gently looked at the winds whirling within the palm of her hand.

Before long, the wind was colored with the light of mana, and the density of compressed energy rose to an immeasurable level. In the center of the sphere, where wind and mana converged, a pale blue light was created, and it gave birth to a new wind.

Felinella thrust out her palm, releasing the sphere, which then absorbed the mana of Mir's spell to further boost its own power. Wind currents became visible before Mir, creating patterns in the air.

In the next moment, Mir's tense face suddenly relaxed. That was because the sphere creating nonstop currents seemed to have vanished without a trace. It was a moment of reprieve for the loser.

And so, Felinella's lips sternly announced, "Take her away. <<*First Material*>>"

A point in the space popped like a balloon, and multiple air currents assaulted Mir. By the time Mir was lifted into the air, she'd been swallowed up by a huge vortex. Even breathing was impossible. The endless impacts broke her bones, and she was scattered against the wall next to the door.

Despite Mir being crushed against the wall, the winds didn't stop until the raging storm caused the sturdy walls to collapse. Mir's body was in such a bad state that there was no need to confirm if she was dead or alive, and a large red flower on the wall said enough.

Once she saw that, Felinella fell to her knees as if her strength had finally left her. The dress of wind returned to where it belonged, and the pure-white magic was broken.

Her consciousness was cloudy, and she didn't even have the strength to stand. The period of dizziness was already over, and the pain running through her entire body passed in an instant. At some point, even her own existence felt foreign.

Even so, she did her best to struggle against the sensation of her life running out. *I have to hurry back. I have to get out of here*, she thought.

Suddenly, a heavy sound roared. Perhaps due to the spell she'd used, large cracks ran through the pillars and some of them collapsed. The destruction spread to the ceiling, and debris fell down like rain.

I guess I overdid it... I have...to get...out... Felinella thought to herself, unable to even speak. When she once more tried to stand up, she finally ran out of strength.

However, she never collapsed to the ground. Instead, a person's arm reached out to support her. With her blurry vision, she could only feel the warm presence of a person. The thought that Alus had come entered her mind, but the blonde hair betrayed her faint hopes.

Even so...she thanked the person as best she could in her mind and closed her eyes.



Just before Mir and Felinella's battle reached its climax, Sisty and Dante entered a room void of any decorations. The temperature in the room was noticeably colder than outside. Sisty poured mana into a depression in the wall; it ran across the channels in the wall and lit up the room.

In the center of the room was a pedestal with Minerva placed respectfully on it.

As soon as he saw the majestic appearance, Dante started talking to himself. "I thought so. Heh heh, now it all adds up. Then that crazy professor was...ha ha ha—this is great. I don't know what research he was doing, but it was definitely connected to this. That means that Nox is probably alive too..."

Sisty looked quizzically at Dante, whose face showed heartfelt enjoyment. The name Nox brought fresh memories of the unprecedented Vivid Bloodletting Incident to Sisty's mind. Dante's words suggested that the horrible criminal might still be alive, something she could not overlook.

"What was that?! Nox is still alive...?! " she asked.

"Right, you were there too... Like Nox, I am from the Trojan Prison. Ha ha, humans must have it rough. No matter how smart you might be, if you don't know anything, you're no different from a clueless fool," said Dante.

"The Trojan Prison?! Y-You mean you're from that secret prison...?!" asked Sisty, her face going pale as she realized Dante's background.

Dante gave Sisty a look of disdain and walked up to Minerva.

“That’s the one,” he said. “Things are going to get interesting from here on. Ha ha, I almost feel bad for the future of humanity when everyone in the seven nations is so brain-dead. In the coming era, only those who are in the know will be able to gain strength. And you lot are going to get culled.”

“Wh-What are you saying...?!” demanded Sisty.

“Are you stupid?” asked Dante. “It’s a war. People killing people. And only those who come closer to the truth will be able to survive.”

“A war? You mean between the criminal organization Kurama and the nations looking to destroy it? Are you a member of Kurama?” asked Sisty.

“No, not me, but they’ve already taken their seat. Not that I know what their ultimate goal is...” Dante’s lips twisted into a grin as if he’d just had a good idea. “But I’ll let you in on a little secret. That’ll make the war more intense too. I know what I said earlier, but it’d be a shame for you to die ignorant.”

There was no doubt that Dante was hoping that it would lead to more chaos and disaster. But the more information Sisty could get, the better, so she stayed quiet, waiting for Dante to continue.

“It all began from a simple question,” he continued. “The existence of Fiends, special abilities, and even magic... Have you ever questioned it? No, you couldn’t have. This shitty human domain exists by accepting it as natural... The wind, the seasons, the sky, even the sun and moon are fake. This depraved paradise is created by lies and illusions.”

Researchers had already exhaustively examined Dante’s question, and they could only come up with a hypothesis supported by further hypotheses. In the end, it was only natural to shift to focusing on something more relevant. They couldn’t sit in front of a research table while Fiends were advancing on them.

Even if Sisty had questions about everything’s origins, there was no end to that line of thought. And adults have jobs and responsibilities. That’s why there was no way to find the answer to all of the innocent questions that children asked.

“Why can Fiends use magic, and what exactly is different between the magic

humans and Fiends use? Even before Fiends appeared, humans used everyday magic like it was nothing. Why? Nobody can give a satisfying answer. Just take a look at the seven nations. The people who don't even have a clue are the ones leading things. They let extremist groups like Kurama gather and only confront them when there is no choice. If the nation continues to be unable to control the individual groups that become too strong, the system will collapse and create chaos. And in the end, criminals like us, who have fallen out of the system, will rise to power. They are just naive to no end," Dante spat out before continuing. "But let me give those idiots a hint. The answers to all of the questions I posed can be found in the Four Books of Fegel. It's an old text written by an old man who reached the pinnacle of knowledge in the past. As far as I'm concerned, that was the beginning of everything."

When Dante brought up the Four Books of Fegel, Sisty was convinced he'd cause more conflict and chaos. Those books were practically forbidden because they were incredibly close to what humanity considered taboo. They were rare, ancient, and sometimes prophetic books. Even among the few researchers who knew they existed, there was no clear description of the books. In fact, copies were a rare sight.

Sisty replied in a quiet tone, "Are you saying that the originals of the Four Books of Fegel exist?"

"That's the level even the person called Witch is at, huh?" Dante taunted. "Or are you just playing stupid? I would have thought that it would be common knowledge for the heavy hitters in Alpha."

Dante put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a small glass marble. After showing it to Sisty, he crushed it between his fingers. Immediately, a special wave of mana emanated from the remains, spreading through the walls of the hallway and room, covering a vast area.

Sensing it, Sisty put herself on guard. She raised her eyebrows when Dante continued with a nonchalant look. "That's right, there's only a limited number of people who can take a seat at the table to decide the world's fate. That said, you need a qualification to even take a seat. From what I can tell, you don't have that yet, so you should just stay quiet."

Based on what Dante had said so far, the seven nations, his group, Kurama, and the Fiends were all at the table. And there was no guarantee that a new player wouldn't show up.

Many things weren't making sense to Sisty, but she couldn't doubt that Dante was holding a giant secret. She just couldn't tell if it was a blessing that would bring a new path for humanity or a curse that would bring them to ruin. But either way, it was a dangerous secret that could destroy the order of the seven nations.

This man needed to be stopped. Even if she couldn't do it, his rampage at least needed to be brought under control. He needed to be chained back up and sealed in the depths of the earth along with the dangerous knowledge he possessed.

Convinced that now was that time, Sisty released her mana and got ready to fight. Even though she didn't have her staff-type AWR with her, at least she could fight him one-on-one here. And she had secretly released the temporary seal on Minerva.

Minerva was the prototype for all AWRs. By breaking the lock and linking with it, as a top class Magicmaster, Sisty could control a portion of its power to assist with her spells.

But Dante was unfazed, remaining calm and collected. "I was going to ensure that you didn't do anything unnecessary, but oh well. Let me tell you what I just crushed. The wave of mana from that was a little special, you see. It was the signal to remove the film around swallowed Ambrosia pills."

"Oh, a new type of the magic-enhancing drug? That's a pretty dull move to use," Sisty said cynically.

Dante's lips twisted into a grin. "Quit your howling. This Ambrosia is apparently different from mana doping. Don't worry; it would be boring if this was a dud. This supposedly transforms humans to higher beings, bringing them as close as possible to Fiends."

"That's not possible. Do you think I'd fall for such a silly bluff?" asked Sisty.

"Then don't. But I'm a cautious man, you see, so I gave these to my men to try

out. Why don't you check it out later? By now, the Ambrosia should have started taking effect on my men up above. Once they've turned into fake Fiends, I bet they'll attack humans right away. Those brats filled with fresh mana must look like great snacks. Your precious little Institute will be drenched in a sea of blood," said Dante.

Sisty's expression changed just a little. At that moment, the room and hallway shook, debris falling from the ceiling.

"Mir's going all out I see. What are you going to do? Want to get buried together?" asked Dante.

The giant door to the hallway was crushed, and a cloud of dust erupted from the gaps. The vibrations of the collapsing pillars shook the underground space. A few beats later, the giant door was completely blown away.

"If you don't hurry, your cute little students are all going to get eaten."

"Tsk!" Unable to dispel her ominous feeling, Sisty clicked her tongue, turned around, and ran off.

She fired a single attack behind her, hoping to destroy the ceiling and bring the whole thing down. Massive chunks rained down, which should have buried both Dante and Minerva.

Hearing Dante's annoyed voice behind her, Sisty entered the hallway, which was flooded with mana residue, a clear sign of how intense the battle had been. Sisty's gaze brushed past Mir, who seemed to have breathed her last, and wandered around the hallway. Debris lined the path between the storage room and the stairs, and the entire path would probably be sealed off within a minute.

But she saw no sign of the person who had defeated Mir. Just who had done it? For now, that question would have to wait.

Sensing an even stronger tremor from the surface, Sisty looked back for a moment. Escape seemed impossible, but between the gaps in the fallen debris, Sisty caught a glimpse of Dante approaching Minerva.

Rather than looking resolved to die, he looked as if he were slowly nestling up to a sweetheart... The scene made Sisty anxious, but she suppressed it and

looked forward, running up the only available path of retreat.

Eighty-Sixth Chapter

Fragile Peace

It took several hours to complete a thorough search of the Institute grounds to confirm that all of the attackers, the escaped prisoners, were gone. Finally, the investigators concluded that the terrorists had been cleared from the campus.

Of course, things weren't so simple that that was the end of it. After all, it was safe to say that the myth of safety within the human domain had been shattered. The Fiends that had suddenly appeared in the Institute had confused the military contingent that arrived. They had been eliminated, but their corpses remained rather than turning to dust.

Moreover, there was a hole from the room containing Minerva to the surface, and Dante had most likely escaped through that. Sisty had personally confirmed it as well.

Using his men and the mutant phenomenon of Ambrosia to cover his escape, Dante had successfully disappeared. And the oldest AWR, Minerva, had been stolen. There were 138 casualties and 59 deaths (out of which two were students).

The Institute was still recovering from the aftermath of the gruesome attack.

"Well...this is a mess," a black-haired boy muttered as he looked up at the destroyed research building.

The silver-haired girl accompanying him followed up with a pout, saying deadpan, "Yes. It's a mess. Please look at this, Sir Alus. Our home has been turned into an observation deck. What skillful work. I must find the skilled artisan responsible and thank them... Sir Alus, I have never tortured anyone before, but do you think I will be able to do it well? I hope they'll be sorry."

The anger and shock had removed all expression from her. Like she said, it

was awful. Alus's laboratory would be unusable for a while.

That said, something about how she'd called it "our home" felt wrong. Sure, they were partners and lived in the same room, but they weren't a couple like Loki had made it sound.

"Well, just calm down," said Alus. "Still, they just had to hit while I was gone. We'll need to start by finding out why they targeted the Institute. And then there are the assassins that were sent after me. I want to find out what kind of information network they have."

"Th-That's true, but...I-look at it! After gathering furniture and furnishings little by little, we were finally able to live comfortably! And yet..." Loki wasn't supposed to be the type to get attached to things, but she was reacting like a normal person over this, depressed and angry.

True, there had been valuable research material in the room, but Alus just had a vague hope that they were undamaged. If the room was unlivable, he would just find somewhere else. Materials could just be gathered again.

The wall had completely collapsed and the inside was plain to see. In particular, the living room area, where Tesfia and the others had sat around the table, was completely gouged out, including the ceiling and floor.

If they looked through the area now, all they'd find were broken pieces of furniture. But Alus knew if he said that aloud, Loki would no doubt frown and let out a heavy sigh. When he thought about that, he realized something. Perhaps the things there had possessed more value than their price to Loki.

The time spent there might have been the real value to her. Alus, who didn't usually feel anything, felt like he was being admonished by Loki's indignant expression. He tried to analyze and imagine Loki's state of mind.

If he took it a step further, would he perhaps be able to feel human emotions like sorrow or sentimentality for the things lost. Looking at the state of his surroundings, he reminded himself that now wasn't the time to get caught up in such a gloomy mood.

There were soldiers and guards all around; all of them with their hands full doing search and rescue or removing debris. The Institute was noisy, and even

the open spaces were lined with tents, with medical personnel running back and forth.

The Institute's familiar everyday life was nowhere to be seen.

There were also generals here and there among the soldiers. The Institute under their protection had been attacked, so it was only natural that VIPs from the military would show up, but... There were plenty of faces that Alus didn't want to see among them. And they probably felt the same.

"Hey, you. You! Do you think you've become so important you can walk past your former superior officer without a word, Alus Reigin?" someone called out arrogantly.

Alus glanced over to find the man and his subordinates standing before him. The site was still abuzz, and this man was wearing a uniform decorated to the brim with medals. He looked completely out of place like that, as if his only goal was to intimidate the other party, but his stocky, obese physique suggested that he'd never trained let alone saw actual battle.

He was the perfect example of the incompetent general who was out of touch with reality.

Alus stepped forward, positioning Loki behind him. "It has been a while. Major General Morwald. As far as I recall, I have never once been under your command."

"Hmph, is that so," Morwald answered, his tone rude. He was part of the power elite in the top brass alongside Vizaist and Berwick, albeit from the noble faction that opposed Berwick and Vizaist.

In the past, the unit led by Vizaist, which Alus had also belonged to at the time, had had to clean up after this man's mess. In the end, the blunders had piled up, leading to a major invasion from Fiends, but Morwald had used ambiguous language to conceal the truth and skillfully avoided being charged with any crimes. After that, he clung onto the top brass like a tick to maintain his authority.

"Hmm, so Vizaist is still running errands for Governor-General Berwick. Good grief, these upstarts are so uncouth I can't bear it," said Morwald.

I see he hasn't changed. The foundation for his power should be shaky right now, but it doesn't look like he's feeling it, thought Alus.

Even though he was part of the noble faction, there were a growing number of nobles who didn't give him support, such as the Fable family and the Socalent family he was just making fun of. Nevertheless, he persistently remained rooted in the field of domestic politics, surrounding himself with the support of upper-level nobles, acting tyrannically under the cover of authority. He was exactly the kind of person Alus hated.

But if Alus were to cause trouble here, it was clear what would happen. Morwald would make a huge deal out of it, using it as material to attack Berwick or Vizaist. There were always troublesome people in the military, but the fact that Alus and Lettie, the military's greatest assets, sided with Berwick must have been very unamusing to Morwald.

Alus was more or less stuck in an inseparable relationship with Berwick, and it wasn't like he'd sworn loyalty to him, but an outsider wouldn't know that. Berwick had looked after Alus since his childhood, and Vizaist had taken care of him too, so anyone would assume as much. And Lettie being Lettie, had an attitude that Morwald would just naturally hate.

Alus let out a heavy sigh and decided to play along. "So are you in charge of this scene, Major General Morwald?"

"Refer to me as 'Your Excellency'! Hmph, no matter... That's right, I am." Morwald grinned wryly and turned his attention to the half-destroyed Institute. "I heard Sisty Nexophia really screwed up. Oh how the mighty have fallen. To think a former Single would fail. The staff and guards could be considered martyrs to their duties, but I can't overlook multiple casualties among the students, the foundation of the future. And because it was such a gruesome scene, I had to come see it myself."

He sounded reasonable, but he was really just looking for ammunition against Sisty, who was siding with Berwick.

Taking advantage of other people's troubles to look for scandalous material...damn hyena, thought Alus.

It wasn't like this was the first time Morwald had done something detestable

for political gain. But Alus was in no position to comment on it; he had distanced himself from the world of politics in order to avoid getting caught up in power struggles in the first place.

“Well, I doubt there was anything wrong with the security. It is clear that this was caused by the principal’s negligence. You should make sure that you show up during the hearing too,” said Morwald.

However, Alus had lost all interest in his pompous remarks and quickly cut off the conversation. “I’ll think about it. Then I will excuse myself here, Major General.”

Morwald’s face turned red with anger when Alus neglected to call him “Your Excellency” and walked past him with a blank look on his face to head for the temporary tents.

Perhaps sensing Alus’s thoughts, Loki ran up to him. “Good work, Sir Alus. You have my sympathy.”

“Yeah. He was the guarantor for Fia’s engagement deed. He’s got a lot of connections because of his support from older nobles, and he’s connected to Womruina as well. So now isn’t the time to pick a fight. If anything, I’m impressed that you managed to endure that,” said Alus.

“How rude. I have been in the military for a long time, you know. However, it seems that it is difficult for even the Governor-General to change the mindset in the military. Although I already knew it.” Loki frowned, recalling the bitterness from before.

Morwald believed that a Magicmaster’s bloodline and their family should be valued most in society, similar to eugenics. In fact, the current military system, where nobles still held authority, was born out of this mindset.

“The Governor-General is in the process of changing things. And as long as Morwald’s in the mix, the anti-Governor-General faction can’t act cohesively, and its individuals make reckless moves. So despite how he looks, he has his uses,” said Alus.

“But...” began Loki.

“I know,” said Alus. “A rotten apple spoils the whole bunch. Berwick probably

plans to get rid of him before that. Still, he sure has been running freely for a long time now. I wonder how far his bad influence has spread.”

Alus would rather not be fighting Fiends only to be caught off guard by a military faction from his own nation. As he had these thoughts, a person stepped out of the tent that Alus was headed towards.

It was the principal, Sisty. She was giving orders to a commissioned officer that had come out with her. After receiving the orders, the officer swiftly used his Consensor to convey them across the site before running off himself.

Alus spoke, looking at his back. “Jeez, this sure is a rough situation, Sisty. And wasn’t that the officer in charge of this site?”

Alus had seen his face before, and he had the highest rank after Morwald, so it wasn’t hard to imagine that he was in charge of the scene. It was strange to see someone who was retired from the military, like Sisty, giving someone like that orders, but considering she was the military’s ace card and that she still had a lot of influence, maybe it wasn’t.

“Alus! Where were you?!” exclaimed Sisty.

Alus had casually called out to her, earning a frown from Sisty as she walked over.

“I spoke with the Governor-General, and a lot of things happened. More importantly, Morwald’s here,” said Alus.

“Yes, let’s move somewhere else before that man finds us,” said Sisty.

“Before you’re ousted from your position as principal from the accusations?” he asked.

“Maybe.” Sisty was so exhausted she seemed to consider that trivial.

Noticing her complexion, Alus fell silent. The more he thought about it, the more mystified he was by Sisty’s impatience.

Alus actually highly valued Sisty’s skills as a Magicmaster. If she were still on active duty, Alpha would have had a third Single.

An attack of this scale, with so many casualties and dead was impossible to overlook. However, Sisty had fearlessly fought her way through the massive,

unprecedented invasion from Fiends that threatened all of humanity. For someone that powerful to look this exhausted...

As they quietly walked behind the tents to avoid the public eye, Alus watched the former Single and current principal of the Second Magical Institute. Perhaps it was because of her exhaustion, but her back looked smaller than usual. That Sisty continued walking forward without making eye contact with him was telling.

“Alus, the responsibility for this incident is all on me,” the principal said. “With this many deaths and injuries among the staff and students, just saying that it was unpreventable won’t cut it. Some are still in a critical state. By the way, Alus, do you know anything about the attackers...? No, I suppose that was a foolish question.”

“Yes, it seems they’re fugitives from a certain place. I’m actually on the move regarding that,” said Alus with deliberate vagueness.

“I see, then that’s fine. You’re on a mission given to you directly by the Governor-General, so I’m sure you can’t say much... I’m sorry. I’m just a little mentally exhausted,” Sisty said, suddenly apologetic.

From the way she talked and acted, Alus felt Sisty must have learned of the attackers’ origins somehow. He couldn’t even imagine that she’d met Dante before this. That said, she was driven by self-condemnation, blaming herself for even the most trivial thing.

“By the way, where did you hear the details?” asked Alus.

“First...yes, over there should be fine.” Sisty muttered, looking not at the main building but to the research building.

They headed for the laboratory. The upper part of the research building was badly damaged, but the foundation was still intact. But that was all the more reason he didn’t like seeing how destroyed his laboratory was. The inside was a mess, as expected, but fortunately, the console was still working. Loki unlocked the door.

“They really renovated this room to be more open, didn’t they,” said Alus with a sigh.

“It has a great view at least,” said Sisty casually.

Loki alone stood still from the sense of loss. Alus felt bad for her, and he also felt like he was missing something important that made him less human. He felt almost nothing from seeing all of the devastation, as if he was a machine.

“What a lonely room this has become,” Alus murmured, not even sure himself if he really felt that way or if he was playing a role.

“I wonder if it will ever go back to the way it was,” said Loki.

“It will be fine. It might take a little time, but it will be repaired,” Sisty said, trying to console Loki despite the heavy atmosphere. She then moved away the debris and brushed away the dust to sit down on the sofa.

Unfortunately, Alus’s research table that was by the window had been blown away with the wall. It was only by chance that the table by the sofa was still in one piece.

Eventually, Loki brought some untouched snacks from the kitchen. It seemed the small plates and the saucers for teacups were all that hadn’t been destroyed. She set them on the table, which tilted a little because its legs were now twisted. But it wasn’t the time to worry about these small details.

“Now, where to begin? All I can really do is tell you what happened and what I saw,” said Sisty. “First, Ms. Tesfia and Ms. Alice fought against the attackers and were badly injured. Ms. Tesfia was particularly badly hurt. Fractures in four locations, bruising all over, and even some burns. A healing Magicmaster is attending to her right now, so I’m sure she’ll recover from her injuries.”

“I see. It’s bad news, but at least she’s still alive. Is she being treated in the Institute?” asked Alus.

“Of course. But that’s because transporting her would take too long. The facilities for treatment weren’t very damaged in the attack either.”

It was a powerful statement, but there was something else Alus wanted to ask. “So, did they at least finish one of them off?”

“Huh?! Just so you know, this isn’t an institute where we teach how to fight people. But they still did the best they could,” said Sisty.

“So they both lost without being able to take down even one of them, huh?” Alus furrowed his brow and scratched his head.

Sisty looked back at Alus with exasperation. Tesfia and Alice had fought against Godma’s dolls when he’d attacked, but the opponent had been too strong. “To defend their honor, they bravely stood up to save a teacher. That was something the other students couldn’t do. And Ms. Tesfia acted out of a sense of responsibility and pride as a noble!”

“Even so, they’re lucky to be alive,” said Alus.

“Well, yes, I can agree with that,” Sisty said, scowling.

After this, it was likely the curriculum would change to incorporate some lessons for fighting against humans. Sisty would probably make the changes without Alus needing to say anything.

“I guess I’ll go take a look at the two later,” he said.

“Ah, but they still might not have woken up yet. And I haven’t received word that the treatment is finished yet.”

“It doesn’t matter. If they’re sleeping, I’ll just kick them awake,” said Alus.

“That’s a little too stern, don’t you think?” Sisty asked, not to Alus but to Loki.

But Loki seemed to see it another way. “That just means he has high hopes for them. And in fact, they have the potential to answer that hope,” Loki said, but internally she sighed.

Those words were a declaration that Alus thought highly of them. As his partner, Loki had complex feelings on the matter.

“Principal, things have been too dangerous lately. These villains are far too shady, and the anti-Fiend specialized Magicmasters can’t handle them,” said Alus.

“I have been made well aware of that. Perhaps I should retrain myself from scratch as well.” Her comment made it sound like a former Single was returning to active duty, but she probably wasn’t being serious.

“How did the escaped convicts appear to you, Principal?” he asked.

“Honestly, I’m not sure I could beat the leader even if I went all out,” the principal admitted. “I’m not all that suited to fighting humans. In the end, I had no choice but to surrender before fighting that leader, Dante.”

From Sisty’s position, it had been an inevitable decision. There had been hostages pushing her to surrender, although Alus wouldn’t have surrendered just because of hostages.

“They’ve run away from the Institute and don’t have any hostages anymore, right? Then I’ll kill them later,” Alus said, his eyes as dark as the night sea.

Even Sisty, who knew that Alus had accomplished plenty of jobs behind the scenes, found herself gulping with complex emotions. But as an adult, she knew that she hadn’t been able to prevent the foolish acts of the people who had used Alus as a tool for killing.

All the adults had known about it and gone along with it. So right now, she felt a little desolate knowing she wouldn’t be able to pull Alus out of his hole.

“Alus, has Lord Vizaist made any moves?” she asked.

“He’s behind this time. There are a lot of escaped prisoners, and he’s trying to get information out to all of the squads moving. The problem is that all the escaped prisoners are pretty strong. It seems that we need to send out elites to eliminate them. Incidentally, it seems that the information Lord Vizaist finally obtained was picked up by following Mir Ostayka. After all, he only just got a report that she’d infiltrated the Institute under a fake alias. He bemoaned never having enough people.”

“As for that, Mir Ostayka was defeated by Ms. Felinella beneath the Institute,” said Sisty.

“What?!” Those words shocked Loki.

Alus wasn’t entirely unfazed himself, but he didn’t let it show. “Lord Vizaist might send Feli out on jobs, but that doesn’t mean she was on Mir’s level. I heard that Mir was particularly dangerous even among the escaped criminals.”

“She’s not in one piece, of course,” said Sisty. “Frankly, she is in a worse state than Ms. Tesfia. Ah, but she will be fine. She’s receiving the very best treatment at the moment.”

“Then that’s fine. By the way, have you confirmed Mir’s death?” he asked.

“We have confirmed her death, but the body hasn’t been recovered because the underground hallway collapsed,” Sisty said.

“Did you confirm it with your own eyes?”

Sisty responded to Alus with a half-hearted “More or less,” and looked outside. She seemed to be looking for someone among the countermeasure personnel gathering below. “Ms. Lilisha... She came and rescued Ms. Felinella, and she saw Mir with her own eyes.”

“Hmm, it sounds like she had a great success, then. Still, to think that she would be able to beat Mir, who was a professional killer.”

From what Alus had seen of Felinella at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, she had been amazing for a student, but she wasn’t good enough to come out on top against a professional.

It might be a different story if she had an ace up her sleeve, like the Fable family’s inherited magic. However, the Socalent family had been built up in Vizaist’s generation. They lacked the funds and history to develop their own spells.

Prying was uncouth, and as if to admonish Alus for his thoughts, Loki interjected, “Sir Alus, I believe praise is in order.”

“Hmm? I guess so. She did finish off one of the targets, after all,” Alus said dryly. Seeing his reaction, Sisty couldn’t help but sympathize with what Tesfia and Alice must go through.

“Those two really must be trying their best,” said Sisty with a sigh. Alus was caught off guard by the emphasis on the word “really.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Besides, now’s not the time for unrelated chats. You might get arrested by Morwald and be made to take responsibility for this situation,” Alus said, returning to the topic at hand.

“Yes, that is certainly a possibility. But more importantly,” Sisty said, looking directly at Alus, “I believe the escaped prisoner you’re searching for is called Dante. He stole Minerva from this Institute and disappeared.”

“Why was Minerva here?!” asked Alus.

“Well, it’s a long story and top secret, but I suppose I need to tell you,” Sisty said and began talking.

She spoke about how in order to fairly manage the power that was Minerva, the seven nations had formed a secret pact. And how its position was transferred to the Second Magical Institute under the care of Sisty, who specialized in defensive magic, after the latest Friendship Magical Tournament.

After her brief explanation, Sisty concluded, “Regardless of the process, it is an undeniable truth that humanity’s treasure was stolen, and I am to blame.”

“I see. So that’s why Morwald showed up here himself,” noted Alus.

“B-But...” Loki interrupted and raised her voice. “Isn’t that a little strange? Whose responsibility is it that the prisoners escaped in the first place? Not to mention that Alpha’s military bears the responsibility for letting them enter the nation in the first place. Not to mention their fighting capabilities are far above what one could expect. And considering that they had hostages I believe casualties are still on the lower end of the scale.”

Alus gave her a levelheaded answer. “Morwald’s here, so the point is that it doesn’t matter. He’ll do anything if it will help carve away at the Governor-General’s political power. His belief that the principal is close to Berwick came back to bite her.”

“Yes, I can’t deny that,” agreed Sisty.

“It might be possible to recover, though. Did you get any leads on Dante’s whereabouts?” asked Alus.

“No, I didn’t have the time for that when I was escaping the underground. After all, something unbelievable happened to his men.” Sisty paused for a moment, a serious expression on her face. “I want you to keep what I’m about to tell you secret. The truth is that...they transformed into Fiends. Can you believe it? Humans turned into Fiends...! Well, halfway anyways. Dante said that it was the result of a drug called ‘Ambrosia.’”

“Huh?”

“Excuse me?”

Both Alus and Loki let out bewildered exclamations, but then Alus remembered something.

Tsk, Godma!

In the past, Alice had been caught up in the mad scientist, Godma Barhong’s attack on the Institute. Once cornered after losing all of his dolls, Godma drank some sort of fluid and transformed into a Fiend. Alus had seen that with his own two eyes.

“It’s hard to believe, but something does come to mind,” said Alus.

“You mean Godma, Sir Alus.” Alus solemnly nodded at Loki’s words.

“I don’t know the theory behind it, but I have come across a similar example. Loki was present at the time too and saw Godma transform into an abnormal being,” Alus explained.

“Yes, I believe you could call his appearance that of a Fiend,” said Loki.

“I can’t say for sure. But he did indeed turn into something inhuman. And speaking of monsters, the only thing that comes to mind are Fiends.”

Loki looked towards him in agreement.

“Also, there were the assassins the other day. The last woman looked like she was starting to transform at the end, but before I could confirm it, a gun user finished her off. Things are starting to look really strange now...”

Sisty nodded at Alus. There had been an incident in another nation where Fiends had suddenly appeared within the human domain. Like with the Devourer incident at Balmes, it was possible that the trouble was being covered up by the nation. The important part was to ensure that the Tower of Babel wasn’t destroyed.

In the light of that, the myth of safety started to look like it was built on a shaky foundation.

So they didn’t invade, but originated from inside... Regardless, how long has it been since Fiends stepped foot inside the human domain? There’ll be hysteria among the upper brass, thought Alus.

What was happening at the Institute was bad. Of all things, several half-Fiends had appeared within a facility managed by the nation.

It wouldn't be strange for there to be multiple witnesses, and depending on how things turned out, it could turn into an international problem, albeit different from Minerva. The very presence of Fiends within the human domain could arouse primal fear among the people and hysteria could spread like wildfire.

"So do you have any information on the Human Fiends that the escaped prisoners transformed into?" asked Alus.

A voice from what used to be a window by the corner of the room said, "Alus, about that..."

A girl with blond, wind-tossed hair slipped in through the half-collapsed ceiling. In her right hand, she held the AWR Magdala. It seemed that she'd hooked the string created by the AWR on the top of the building and used that to climb up.

Lilisha appeared before Alus and the others dressed in her work outfit rather than her Institute uniform. The black-based outfit was decorated with intricate ornaments. It was made from a good mana conductor and suited her quite well. As commander of the new Aferka, she was wearing it as a symbol of Cicelnia's hopes in the organization's rebirth.

But the pretentious way she'd entered the research building made it seem like she'd picked up some bad habits from the ruler's aide, Rinne Kimmel.

"The door and bell are still there, you know? Did the ruler never teach you how you're supposed to visit someone's house?" Alus asked in exasperation.

However, she smiled and rocked back and forth, preparing to swing herself to the floor. The thread cut and Lilisha tried to land. Unfortunately it was on the edge of the destroyed building...

Lilisha flapped her hands in panic as she lost her balance.

"T-Take my hand!!!" Lilisha reached out in panic, and Alus grabbed and pulled her in, but... "Ah?!"

Lilisha gasped as her other flailing hand hit a shelf by the wall with a bang. The shelf was already standing on the tilted floor, so the blow made it shake, causing it to fall through a hole in the wall along with everything on it.

Silence filled the room until the sound of everything shattering reached them. Alus furrowed his brow but pulled her safely into the room.

“We’re lucky nobody was standing below,” said Alus.

“Y-Yes, absolutely,” said Lilisha.

“I’ll send the bill to the ruler,” said Alus.

“What? That shelf was already on the verge of falling! It was only a matter of time until it happened, even if I hadn’t shown up! So why not wait on that? I am Aferka’s commander now after all...” Lilisha pointed at herself in panic, but Alus was unmoved.

“So what?”

“It was only just set up, you know. We still don’t have much of a budget either! If you make the ruler take responsibility it’s going to get cut even more!” said Lilisha.

“I know that too. But as somebody who stands above others, you are expected to take responsibility,” said Alus.

“Ugh, why did this have to happen?” A disappointed Lilisha sat down next to the principal looking dejected.

Sisty offered a consoling helping hand. “Alus, could you cut her some slack? She did rescue Ms. Felinella.”

“I see. Well, let’s not dwell on the past,” said Alus. “More importantly, Lilisha, has Aferka come to the Institute too?”

“Y-Yes. But they have already pulled out after eliminating the escaped prisoners that transformed into Fiends. Staying any longer would just bring about unnecessary speculation,” explained Lilisha.

“I see, so you properly finished them off?”

As assassins, dealing with Human Fiends seemed simple for Aferka. Alus knew

how skilled Lilisha's brother Rayleigh had been, so he had a hard time imagining that the more-skilled members of Aferka would be outdone by Fiends in the Outer World.

"Frankly, we lack the know-how for fighting Fiends, so the fighting is not very effective, but we have the basics down," said Lilisha.

After that, Alus extracted information about the Human Fiends from Lilisha and contemplated for a while. He learned that while they'd transformed into Fiends, the transformation itself was varied. They didn't seem to match any of the Fiends in the Outer World. Since some still retained human features, the term Human Fiends seemed apt. But according to Sisty, their power was around the level of a C-class or B-class Fiend.

Once explanations were done, Loki asked a question. "But why did Aferka happen to be near?"

"Hmm, I didn't really want the principal to hear this, but I guess it can't be helped," said Lilisha. "I told you before about how we're looking into Womruina and its surroundings, remember?"

"Ah, so you were looking into that illegal drug," deduced Alus.

"Well, that is one of our jobs. So we looked into the secret manufacturing plant for Chemical Boost, and as expected, it seems very possible that they're connected to Womruina. And Ambrosia is also a mana stimulant like Chemical Boost," said Lilisha. Then she leaned forward, getting into the main topic. "So near the outskirts is a now-abandoned manor that belonged to Womruina. Recently, we found some Ambrosia that is different from the existing one."

That was something not even Sisty knew.

"In other words, it was Ambrosia with an unknown ingredient mixed in," Lilisha continued. "It's turned it from a power-up into something completely different. We also found evidence that the supposedly abandoned manor had been used recently. The question is by who."

"The escaped prisoners, huh. I doubt the local drug addicts threw a party," said Alus.

"Can't you at least pretend to think on it a little more?" asked Lilisha.

“If you want to flaunt your information, go do it elsewhere,” said Alus.

Instead of pouting, Lilisha wore a sweet smile on her face as if to hint at her informational superiority. “That means there’s a very high probability Womruina is responsible for guiding the escaped prisoners. Aside from finding Ambrosia in their temporary hideout, we tracked the escaped prisoners’ movement to the Institute.”

Alus glanced at Lilisha’s face and watched Sisty’s reaction. While Lilisha hadn’t touched on it, it was possible that Aferka waited to act so that they could confirm the escaped prisoners’ transformations. Although, since Lilisha was their commander now, that seemed unlikely.

Either way, Alus had seen both Godma and the female escaped prisoner who’d ambushed him transform. It was safe to conclude that the woman had most likely been turning into a Fiend.

“Anyways, we now know that the Ambrosia that we were investigating can transform people into Fiends,” said Lilisha.

“As somebody who has fought Fiends, it’s hard to accept, but it happened before my very eyes. But to think it had to happen in the Institute of all places,” said Sisty in disbelief.

“Principal, do you remember the Godma incident?” asked Alus.

“Yes, that might have been the first bad omen. And I heard some details from the Governor-General later,” said Sisty.

“This is just a hunch, but I have a feeling that this incident is related to that one. Lilisha, for the time being, I believe you’re on the mark. Lord Vizaist has yet to find the supporter who provided the mastermind with funds,” said Alus.

“Thank you. We’ve been struggling to gather information on that matter ourselves, but I see. We could try with Lord Vizaist. Ms. Felinella has been caught up in this too after all,” said Lilisha. She seemed to already be aware of Godma.

Ah, right. She’s looked into me. I guess it only means that she’s investigated the incidents around the Institute that I’ve been caught up in too, thought Alus.

“While it might just be a hunch, it does sound plausible. Aww, I can feel a headache coming,” Sisty complained.

Alus returned the conversation to the incident. “I supposedly prevented Godma from carrying his research data out of the nation, but it seems likely that it’s secretly leaked out anyways. I wonder if there’s a connection between Godma’s research and Ambrosia.”

There, Loki joined the conversation. “May I ask something? Can we even stop that Ambrosia from leaking? If half-Fiends can suddenly appear out of nowhere in the human domain, the seven nations will need to overview their defenses.”

“I doubt that’ll be all,” said Alus. “Well, that’s why Lilisha is moving.”

Lilisha herself let out a sigh and shook her head to clear her thoughts. “I suppose, but this is way too much trouble for a first job. But what about your problem? The Human Fiends were cleaned up, but the escaped prisoners’ boss managed to run away, causing even more problems, didn’t he?”

She was right about that. Leaving the Ambrosia problem to Lilisha, Sisty had the bigger problem of dealing with the theft of Minerva.

“Yes, something needs to be done about Dante stealing Minerva. Alus, could I perhaps ask for your cooperation about that?” asked Sisty.

“I refuse,” said Alus flat out. Lilisha and Loki kept silent. “I already have orders from the Governor-General, and I will only be focusing on completing that mission. I won’t accept any new requests, nor will I get involved.”

At this, Sisty could only mutter, “Yes...that is the right call.”

She looked downcast and she sounded lonely, but she sounded surprisingly relieved. If Alus got involved, he would be stepping over the line drawn between them. While Sisty understood that, she still had complex feelings about it, so she’d gone ahead and asked. But now that he’d refused, she was relieved.

Sisty was no longer in a military position. So if her request were to take on the tone of a mandatory order, it would distort her relationship with Alus. It would no longer be a casual and humane relationship where they could make deals or cooperate in the case of emergencies.

Sisty, who saw Alus as more than just a student, was reluctant to do that.

Alus was somewhat aware of her internal conflict, so he clumsily added a few words. “But like the Governor-General, it would be a problem for me if you disappeared from the Institute. I will only be pursuing Dante, and whatever he’s carrying is no concern of mine. If you want to pick it up and bring it home, then by all means. And if it’s too heavy, I could lend a hand to the elderly. I won’t allow you to be dismissed on your own after all the trouble you’ve gotten me into.”

Hearing that, Sisty smiled even though her eyes were still downcast. She recalled the boy when he had been quite a bit younger...and she even felt like putting her hand on his head and ruffling his black hair.

Look at you growing up while I wasn’t looking. But...that’s all the more proof that Berwick and Vizaist did something sinful, thought Sisty.

Alus had a past that still cast a shadow over his heart. And while she didn’t go so far as to hate them, Sisty couldn’t completely forgive the two people involved in that.

After a moment, she shook off that inner conflict, clapped her hands, and forcibly changed the topic. “So we were talking about where Dante went after he escaped the Institute.”

“Lilisha, do you know anything about that?” Alus asked, even though he knew it was pointless. If she’d known anything she would have shared the information on her own accord.

As expected, Lilisha shook her head, but Loki made a suggestion. “Sir Alus, how about using long-range detection magic to search for him?”

Typically, a spotter used their detection magic to find Fiends from the flow of their mana or by locating their cores. But if well applied, it could be used to search for people too. Right now, Loki could pick up on even faint traces of mana within a fifty-meter radius.

But Sisty rejected the idea. “Unless that man leaks mana on purpose, I doubt any spotter will find a trace. And even without that, these escaped prisoners are particularly thorough.”

“You mean to say that he has learned to conceal his presence so that he can’t be discovered by spotters?” asked Loki. Sisty let out a pessimistic sigh and nodded.

“I see. So the most vicious criminals in the underworld are professionals at hiding too. I guess they use mana manipulation to minimize any traces they leave behind,” said Alus.

“But you normally restrain your mana too, Sir Alus. I can detect you to a degree even at some distance,” said Loki.

Hearing that, Sisty grinned, knowing a thing or two about the topic. Lilisha, meanwhile, had no idea what she was talking about and wore a puzzled look.

“Well... You see...” Alus started. Naturally he understood the principle, but he hesitated to explain.

Sensing the strange atmosphere, Sisty decided to meddle. “Ms. Loki, if you think about it for a moment, you should be able to understand why Alus’s mana is so easy for you to sense.”

“What do you mean?” Loki earnestly pondered it, looking away, Alus decided to take that opportunity to move away from her a little.

“You have consciously or unconsciously marked him,” Sisty explained. “You know, how you would be able to pick out the person you like from a crowd at a glance. Oh, you young people are just so adorable!”

Loki looked at Alus in shock. And Alus was happy that he’d looked away ahead of time.

“Y-You have the wrong idea! Sir Alus, I wouldn’t try to mark you with my scent like some animal!” Loki panicked, but reality wasn’t far off. It went back to when Loki had challenged Alus to become his partner. She had used a forbidden catalyst that put her life at risk, and Alus had poured his own mana into her to pay the price and save her. Alus surmised that that had been the moment when some sort of connection had formed between their mana information.

For now, Alus was the only one in Alpha who could do that. There was no way to verify it, and he wanted to avoid exposing a portion of his secrets. Moreover, he felt a little awkward about touching on it. So he kept quiet and kept looking

away.

“Hmm? I don’t really understand it, but you mean Loki can perfectly grasp Alus’s movements? Well, that would help with my surveillance mission,” Lilisha pointlessly added, and Loki’s face turned visibly redder.

“Sir Alus, I don’t use detection magic that often. Do I?” Loki timidly asked, pulling on his sleeve.

Alus hadn’t suffered any bit from the stalking Sisty and Lilisha had suspected yet. “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask yourself?” he responded.

“N-No way...” said Loki.

Sisty calmly continued, “However, it seems clear that a person’s mana information is related in some way. When I was in the military, I heard strange tales about it.”

“I can’t deny or affirm that. With magic research how it is now, it will probably remain unexplained for the foreseeable future,” Alus answered in place of Loki, who was red up to her ears.

It wasn’t entirely rare to hear about Magicmasters who were lost in the Outer World spending three days and nights wandering around before luckily rejoining with their squad despite not being spotters. There were many things that were yet to be clarified by modern research, such as what a Magicmaster’s intuition was or the connection between intuition and mana.

“Ah! Speaking of spotters, I just remembered that I was asked to run an errand.” Lilisha raised her voice to show that her errand was rather important. She pushed her overcoat aside and put her hand into the bag slung across her body, finally revealing what had been bulging under her coat. “Here, this is from Lady Cicelnia. Ms. Rinne apparently struggled to get her hands on it.”

The thing she pulled out had filled the entire bag, looked like a stone slab, and it was wrapped in layers of high-grade anti-magic fiber cloth.

“This better not be anything strange,” said Alus.

“Like I said, it’s from Lady Cicelnia! Of course it won’t be,” said Lilisha.

“You’re the only one who’d think so. You’re like a crazed fanatic.” Alus

received the object with a face of disgust. It was heavier than he imagined.

“I was only asked to deliver it, so I don’t know what’s inside,” said Lilisha.

“Mmm, I wonder what it is.” Loki curiously looked on from the side, the red on her face having already disappeared.

“All I know is that it’s not anything good,” said Alus.

“I think anyone would normally jump for joy over something directly from the ruler. Well, I guess this just highlights the relationship between you and the ruler,” Sisty’s exasperatedly said, but there was sympathy in her voice. She had been a Single in the past, so she could understand Alus’s struggles. That said, she also had a somewhat amused smile on her face.

I see you start taking pleasure in other people’s misfortune when you get older, Alus thought.

While Alus wanted to complain, he managed to hold it in. He needed to keep an open mind, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to be pushed around by the ruler. So in his mind, he decided that if this was just a spark that would cause further problems, he would pretend he didn’t see anything and push it back onto Lilisha.

Removing the cloth around the object, time froze in Alus’s mind when he saw what was revealed. The material was like glass, and the texture was solid and reminiscent of ceramics. It weighed more than one would think from how it looked.

It was an ambiguous and strange book. The cover was vividly decorated with a detailed, elaborate design. It was a deep, dark blue that could make one think that it was imbued with mana and had a slight wine-red tint.

“What is this? A book... But the material is odd. Do you know what it is?” Lilisha asked Alus, looking puzzled.

Sisty furrowed her brows and muttered, “At the very least, it isn’t some kind of celebratory gift.”

“Yes, if this was just a present, I’d be relieved. No, even if it wasn’t...”

“So what is this, Sir Alus?” Loki cut in and asked.

Alus looked from her to the book. Even as he ran his fingers across the cover, he couldn't believe it. "The Four Books of Fegel. And an original at that," he said.

Loki raised her eyebrows, as if trying to recall a distant memory. But the first to react to his words were Sisty. "They exist?! How can you even tell if it's real? But if it comes from the ruler directly, then..."

Sisty couldn't hide how shaken she was. And Alus finally nodded. "So you knew about them too. Books filled with mysteries, called either miraculous prophetic books or the most unusual books in the world. Copies exist, but even they are not in circulation. I've heard rumors of the nation, and the ruler specifically, holding on to them, and this partially proves it."

"Why would the nation safely store such an incomprehensible book?" asked Lilisha.

Alus answered Lilisha's amateurish question without hesitation. After all, the Four Books of Fegel would lead to the mysteries of the world that Alus was in pursuit of. "They are said to be the only books that touch on the essence of magic. I hear they are filled with nothing but research topics that nobody knows about. There are also theories that they touch on the origin of Fiends and magic."

"Huh? No way, it could only be some old people's delusions filled with nothing but rumors," said Lilisha.

Sisty responded to Lilisha's denial with a serious expression. "It is said that the Four Books of Fegel are from a time beyond the past where mankind touched on such fantasies and delusions. For starters, the characters used are so difficult they're near impossible to read. We're not talking half a century here. They might even be before the seven nations were formed."

"What?! You mean it could be from before Fiends appeared?" asked Lilisha.

"Well, we don't know exactly when Fiends appeared, so it's hard to tell. However, the only thing I can say is that they are rumored to touch on not only the origins of Fiends and magic but also magical developments that would have been unthinkable at the time. That would be why they are called prophetic books," said Sisty.

“You seem to know a lot about them,” said Loki.

“Yeah,” added Lilisha, nodding along.

“Well, I am a former Single and an educator. Even so, that is about all I know. Not long ago I thought it was just some old folklore,” Sisty said and shrugged. That was only natural, as only a handful of occult enthusiasts or delusional researchers would have heard that name in general society.

“It’s only a smattering of knowledge I got from my teacher,” said Sisty.

“What?! From Mrs. Miltria?!” Lilisha burst out by reflex.

“Oh yes, I suppose that would make you my sister apprentice,” said Sisty.

“Huh, oh, yes. Although I’m not an official disciple, I can’t help but think of her as my teacher too,” said Lilisha.

“Hmm. Still, I’m surprised to see that she would take such a young disciple,” Sisty said with a somewhat sentimental tone.

Aferka’s former advisor had cared for Lilisha to the point that she worked together with the ruler to protect her. Perhaps to Miltria, Lilisha was like a granddaughter.

“That aside, Mrs. Miltria also has an interest in research in magic history. But she’s rather narrow-minded, so she didn’t do anything as eccentric as getting her disciple wrapped up in it, but instead she dabbled in it as something to enjoy at the end of her life. I heard all sorts of things from her,” said Sisty.

“If I recall, the Four Books of Fegel were a rather dubious tale with only a few eccentrics who were seriously in pursuit of them. So it seems Miltria is quite the oddball,” said Alus. He’d gotten a rather decent impression when he’d seen her at the palace, but looks could be deceiving.

“You of all people are going to say that?” Sisty asked and gave him a cold stare, but Alus shrugged it off.

“I had a feeling that I saw one of the Four Books of Fegel during the incident with Godma, but it didn’t show up during the on-site inspection afterwards. But I recall that the aura it had was exactly like this one.”

With an original in hand, it was clear now that the book at the time was also

one of the original Four Books of Fegel. The problem was the source of the book in front of him.

Berwick had implied that Kurama was behind the incident, and Alus was more or less in agreement with that. It was an easy possibility to imagine. In fact, as someone pursuing Kurama, he felt it would be strange if they weren't involved in such a large incident.

"Well...let's examine this a little," Alus said and reached for the book in front of him.

He touched it with great care and carefully flipped a page, which felt like a thin board. Eventually, the conviction on his expression turned into surprise. Alus could reach ancient languages and Lost Spells to a degree, but he couldn't read this at all.

It wasn't a matter of age. Even the approach to characters was completely different from existing ones. It was like they had come from another world.

But as he skimmed through it, he noticed that the characters he didn't know were slowly being converted in his brain on their own. It was like the characters were magically being converted to some sort of sign and forming a connection to a meaning in his mind. As a result, he could read parts of it.

The sensation was familiar to Alus. When Alus had fought the king of moths, Shem Azah in Vanalis, he had dispelled the ultimate-level wind spell Kehehage. During the strange phenomenon born from that, Alus had indeed come in contact with that sensation.

This phenomenon again. I don't know what it is, but this is convenient, he thought.

As he continued to flip through the pages, some things started to become clearer, albeit still vague. The book seemed to have diagrams, although they were crude. But strangely enough, they weren't pictures drawn on a page. As the letters started to make sense through the conversion above, points turned to lines, drawing images in his mind.

They were magic formulas, but they varied in style. He understood why Cicelnia had sent it to him. Eventually, the excitement caused his head to hurt.

As he rested against a piece of overturned equipment behind him, the last line of letters burned into his mind and was replaced by a flash of inspiration.

Although it was somewhat different from what he had seen during the demonstration at the Friendship Magical Tournament...but it certainly had an appearance that reminded him of Minerva.

I see, so this part of the description concerns Minerva, Alus thought. I can only get a vague understanding of it, but I should be able to find out what Dante is after. In fact, just how much does Cicelnia know? I'm probably the only one who can oppose Dante, but it's not like she has an acquaintance among the escaped prisoners... No, it couldn't be.

Having the ruler see through this much just made Alus more suspicious. Where had Cicelnia even gotten the information on the escaped prisoners, and how did she know what Dante was after?

"Did you really not hear anything from Cicelnia? Sending a book like this is just bad taste." Alus turned a suspicious glance towards Lilisha.

She frantically waved her hands in front of her. "I don't know anything! Really, I haven't been told anything. But based on your reaction, it seemed like it was perfectly timed. Maybe this was in the works before the Aferka problem was resolved."

"I bet. By the way, Ms. Rinne is a highly skilled spotter. Did she tell you anything...?" asked Alus.

"Not at all. I don't know anything about that either! It's true!" said Lilisha.

Like with the Aferka incident, he couldn't get a read on what Cicelnia was doing. All that he could tell was that she was working towards something far in the future. She'd probably known that Alus had an interest in the Four Books of Fegel ahead of time too. He had gotten a copy from Berwick when he enrolled into the Institute. It wouldn't be strange for the ruler to have heard about that.

Seeing Alus fall deep into thought, Sisty tried to bring his attention back to the matter at hand. "Now, now, why not put that aside for now. Nobody can understand what's going on in Lady Cicelnia's head. At this moment, we should focus on the escaped prisoners, right? I know this is a little late, but Dante said

everything began with the Four Books of Fegel and that we didn't know anything."

Sisty recounted to Alus that Dante seemed to know something about Minerva's mysterious power.

"Then I better get on with it. With the logic of the Four Books of Fegel transmitting information images to my brain, as long as the analytical equipment for deciphering Lost Spells is safe, I should be able to find out more," said Alus.

"Sir Alus..."

Alus looked at a corner of the room that Loki indicated with her stare, and his shoulders slumped. The equipment Alus needed to analyze the Four Books of Fegel in detail had been completely destroyed.

"I guess not even Cicelnia could have predicted this," said Alus.

"There might be still-working equipment in the Institute that you can use," Sisty said, offering her cooperation.

"I don't have high hopes, but I appreciate it. At the very least I need a scanner analyzer and a mana extraction analyzer," said Alus.

"Uhm, Sir Alus, wouldn't that be the latter?" asked Loki.

"Huh?" Alus said and realized that he was currently leaning on the massive device. He hadn't noticed because it was lying on its side, but it was indeed the mana extraction analyzer. That said, part of its frame was twisted from a bad impact, so it would probably be unusable without maintenance.

"And the scanner was over there..." Loki said.

Alus's shoulders slumped once more as he followed Loki's gaze. In a corner of the room was the scanner analyzer, having seen the most damage of all.

"Talk about bad luck. Then maybe I can use the shelf of Lost Spell related materials to...ah." Indeed, the shelf he was thinking about was the very same one that Lilisha had just given its last rites. Lilisha slowly turned her back and tried to escape. "Hey, pick it up."

Alus pointed outside, and all Lilisha could do was give him her best forced

smile. “Uh, right. I was just about to do that, aha ha... S-see you later!” Lilisha said and flew out the door.

Since it would be too much for her to pick up alone, Alus asked Loki to follow her. Besides, he didn’t need all of the documents. He could also use the Institute’s library to fill in any blanks.

“Right, I should get in contact with Lord Vizaist too,” said Alus.

He hoped that the cooperators from Clevideet, the Fanon squad, had taken care of Gordon and Suzar. If they could at least pin them down, Alus would have a much easier time moving. If Dante joined up with them, things would become a lot more annoying.

That said, now he had gotten his hand of one of the Four Books of Fegel, and in his excitement, he was feeling a lot more tolerant. He prayed that it wouldn’t be a letdown, but his mind was already flying off to the ocean of unknown knowledge.

If he could push dealing with the escaped prisoners onto Lettie, he would have paid anything to do it. But his pride wouldn’t allow him to abandon the job, since he’d accepted it.

“You look like you’re having fun. But if Dante goes into hiding, it will get a lot trickier, right?” Sisty asked, pressing in a roundabout way.

Alus casually brushed her words off, walking around the laboratory to find any still-working devices. “It’s not a problem, and if you get too concerned about it, your face is going to get wrinkled,” he said.

“Hey! Sure, Dante doesn’t seem to be a member of Kurama, but it’s too dangerous to leave him on his own. He said something like the seven nations will be caught up in the flames of war too. And now he has Minerva and is in hiding. Don’t you find that disturbing?” Sisty argued, recalling Dante’s words.

He’d been talking about a table for deciding the fate of the world. He’d said in the midst of chaos, leaders of several factions would be necessary for the sake of a new future. It wasn’t clear what that meant, but Sisty felt it could be essential information for humanity to overcome the dangers it would face in the future.

But even hearing this, Alus remained indifferent. “I wonder about that. It might just be this Dante’s delusions of grandeur. Maybe his talks about a fateful table and the rights to earn a seat are just trying to sound plausible. Doesn’t it sound similar to the tricks of some shady prophet?”

“But he did seem to know something about Minerva. I don’t know what, but that can’t be good,” said Sisty.

“I’ll find out by examining the pages related to Minerva in the Four Books of Fegel. Besides, the seven nations already have plenty of problems on hand. While Fiends are still around we might be fine, but you never know when someone might pull the trigger on some great war. There’s no doubt that there’s no room in the future for violent and bloodthirsty escaped prisoners,” Alus said, then complained about another broken device.

Exasperated by that, Sisty got up from the sofa. “Oh fine, then I’ll be leaving now.”

“You should probably stop. I can hear Major General Morwald’s voice below. Jeez, if he’s just going to disturb the scene, he never should have come in the first place,” said Alus.

When she listened for it, she could indeed hear the overbearing man’s voice, and from the sound of it, he was looking for Sisty.

“What will you do?” Alus asked.

“Maybe I will stay here a little longer,” Sisty said after a pause.

“As you please,” said Alus. “I could offer you some water.”

“I think I should do it myself,” Sisty said, making a beeline for the kitchen. She got an idea of where things were and started scavenging.

“I will make a list of rooms I want repaired, so please fix all of them, even if it means rebuilding this entire place. I will pay for it if necessary,” Alus said without anything in particular in mind.

That was just the thought that had entered his mind as he looked at the now-well-ventilated laboratory. Perhaps he’d wanted to see the room like it used to be once again. He was not used to getting attached to where he lived. To him, it

was just a temporary abode for eating and sleeping.

Alus suddenly stopped moving and closed his eyes. When he did, he felt like he could see all kinds of things that had happened in this room, like they were projected directly from his memories.

With Sisty in the kitchen, he couldn't tell what reaction she had. However, it seemed she had moved a stool to stand on and reach a tall shelf.

"That's what I intend to do," she responded to his request. "But don't worry about the money. Besides, it would only be a problem if you remodeled the place however you pleased. The only thing that I can say is that it will be easier for me to officially fulfill your wishes if I'm still the principal."

"If you're going to be so petty, you'll only earn animosity," said Alus.

"I do feel bad for asking the unreasonable and for Major General Morwald," said Sisty.

"Well, just leave Minerva to me. I'll do what I can." Alus closed his eyes once more. If Sisty were forced to take responsibility and her position was threatened, there were still things that he could do.

Vizaist and Berwick would no doubt do what they could to prevent it too. The Institute was an important facility for the military, so it was hard to imagine anyone but Sisty running it with her background as a Single and her expertise in defensive magic. She was also well known in the international community and had both military and government connections.

Sisty's sly nature aside, Alus did value her highly. He also felt that the situation would have been different if Sisty's underground stores of mana had been in perfect shape. She had used up a vast amount of mana in order to block the taboo spell Senas Requiem used during the Godma incident.

The escaped prisoners' attack had been clever, and Sisty had had her hands full responding to attacks targeted at several areas of the campus. As a result, she had been too distracted to notice Dante's main goal was Minerva. If she'd known from the start, she could have made a plan to keep Minerva from being stolen so easily.

Still, he did a good job inciting the escaped prisoners. Dante, huh... He's hard

to get a grasp on but for a different reason than Kurama's executives. We'll see what a mere criminal knows, Alus thought, moving his arms around to relieve the stiffness of his shoulders.



After a thorough examination of the laboratory and its equipment and some hasty preparations for analysis, Alus headed for the tents that were set up to treat the injured.

He was going to check on Tesfia and Alice but was unable to find them, so he headed for the main building instead. Once treatment was done, the injured were moved there. He also thought about paying Felinella a visit, but she had been carried off to a hospital under military jurisdiction and was no longer at the Institute.

Beds filled up the classrooms in the main building, and some of the injured even spilled out into the hallways. Just seeing that, one could tell how fierce and ruthless the attack had been. It was a sight that Alus was used to, after many battles in the Outer World.

He walked past a line of body bags that held the remains of teachers and guards. Then he entered the main building, which smelled of medicine and so echoed with groans of pain. It was a scene from right out of hell for a civilian, but Alus didn't so much as waver at something like this.

Loki and Lilisha had been sent to a different room to collect materials and lighter equipment that had been gathered at Sisty's instructions. But even if Loki were here, she would have also remained calm. Moments like this made one painfully aware that the military was a career where one had to kill their heart.

After wandering around several rooms, he still hadn't found Tesfia or Alice. Instead, he found hurt students here and there. There was a girl, pale from shock and still trembling. There was a boy with dead eyes, staring at the ground.

The students hadn't really experienced the Outer World, so this had been a shocking experience. Several students stared mystified at Alus walking without a care in the world. They all looked like they wanted to appeal for something.

They no doubt knew of Alus's abilities and wanted to know why he hadn't saved them. As far as they knew, Alus was helping the military. In that sense, if he'd been present during the tragedy they could have clung onto him to be saved.

That was common in the military too. Alus couldn't count how many times he'd been asked why he'd abandoned someone. And every time, he had brushed them aside with an "I don't care."

That stance still hadn't changed. But unlike in the military, nobody called out to him. The students didn't have the courage to do it, so all they did was send him glares.

Their complacency around peace is deeply ingrained in them, he thought.

What were they expecting? Even if Alus had been present, there was no guarantee that he would have helped those who didn't face the difficulties on their own. It would have been one thing if they were prudent and prepared to endure shame in order to survive for the greater good. In that respect, Tesfia and Alice were better to him even though they'd misjudged the difference in their ability and their opponent's.

"Don't worry about it, Alus," a voice said as Alus was brushing off the students' stares. It was second-year student Senniat Fokmil.

"I don't think that it's because you're special. They are just feeling helpless right now...and they're unconsciously looking for someone they can take out their frustration and insecurities on," she continued.

Alus wasn't directly acquainted with her, but he'd heard her name from Alice before.

"It doesn't bother me. Nice to meet you. I am Alus Reigin."

"Ah, I'm sorry for making you introduce yourself when I called out to you... I am Senniat." She had a friendly attitude, and she looked at Alus apologetically. "Uhm... Did you come to check on Ms. Tesfia and Ms. Alice?" asked Senniat.

"Yes, I believe they should be resting here," said Alus.

"Then you will be glad to hear that they've both opened their eyes. But I

really do feel bad about them. I am so pathetic.” Senniat cast her eyes down and sighed in self-condemnation. She offered to guide Alus to them, so he followed her. “I should have stopped them from doing anything reckless. It’s my fault they were so hurt.”

“Why are you telling me that?” Alus asked.

“I heard about you from Ms. Alice. I was overseeing her group during the extracurricular lesson, and I had the same mindset this time around too...” said Senniat.

“I see. But they did what they did because they wanted to, so it’s ultimately their own responsibility. If they die, that’s all there is to it. Besides, you’d ruin your body if you tried to keep up with everything reckless your juniors did. So don’t force yourself to carry that burden,” said Alus, trying to give her advice, but even he felt it was somewhat hollow.

From what he could tell, Senniat wasn’t a bad person, but he also couldn’t say that she was the right kind of person to lead a squad. Being a good person alone wasn’t enough.

After thinking about that, Alus tightly pursed his lips together. He was having a hard time switching out of his work mindset.

After a while, they arrived at the infirmary. He’d come here once before but thanked her anyways. In response, she lowered her head and apologized again. He felt she’d probably done the same to Tesfia and Alice too. *She’s a difficult person to handle*, he thought.

Before going in, Alus took a deep breath to return to his usual self at the Institute.

Inside, things were more or less as he expected. Tesfia and Alice were sitting on their beds and talking. He’d heard they had been seriously injured.

“Are you two sure you should be up?” Alus asked as he stepped in.

“Fia, looks like I won our bet,” Alice said in her usual bright tone.

Tesfia ground her teeth in response and looked at Alus. The girls were both wearing patient gowns, but they didn’t look as bad as he’d heard. Tesfia had her

arm wrapped in a sling, and Alice had bandages wrapped around her upper body. Alus realized it was possible that Tesfia's lower body, which was covered by a blanket, was in an even worse state.

"I was so sure that you wouldn't come check up on us right away," said Tesfia.

"I show up and that's the first thing you say? Well, I did come empty-handed," admitted Alus.

Since there was no free chair, Alus sat down at the edge of Alice's bed, and the simple pipe bed creaked.

"So what were you betting on?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," Alice said, like it was a matter of course.

Alus shot back, "Then that's not a bet, is it?"

From how Tesfia tilted her head, it seemed that they didn't understand the meaning of these kinds of bets in a military setting. They weren't trying to ease the tension in the battlefield; they were just playing a game as students. But he found himself drawn to their energy. Perhaps that was why he felt that it would be inappropriate to act overly serious.

"Jeez, you sure got beaten up badly. That's what you get for meddling when you're weak," said Alus.

"Hmph, did you come here to lecture us? This isn't a big deal," Tesfia asserted, observing Alus's expression. Alice smiled wryly and gave him an apologetic look.

"Look at you talking," said Alus. "Then maybe I should roll up that blanket and check you for injuries."

At once, both girls spoke:

"Huh?! Y-You don't need to do that!"

"Yeah, it's fine!"

But when Tesfia curled up out of caution, her face distorted in pain.

"Fia, are you okay?! Did your wounds open up?!" Alice looked worried.

Alus snorted. "I told you so. I'll take a look, so get on with it."

“It’s fine, really,” said Tesfia.

“What are you getting all embarrassed for? I saw you naked some time ago, so I won’t think anything about it now,” Alus said with a serious expression.

Alice was surprised. “Was that in the infirmary before? I remember Fia looking a little happy despite being angry,” Alice said with a mischievous smile.

Tesfia’s face instantly turned red in response. “Th-That was just an accident! And what do you mean by thinking nothing about it?!”

“Keep it down. Someone’s going to hear you,” said Alus.

“Then don’t do something you don’t want to be seen doing!” Tesfia insisted as Alus moved over to her bed. She stiffened to fight back. “A-Are you serious...?” she asked, trying to be intimidating.

When she realized from his expression that she couldn’t win, she began making excuses. “It’s fine, really! Oh, I-I know. What about Alice? She said she’s in pain too.”

“That’s uncalled for, Fia! I’m properly resting here, so I’m fine! Why don’t you have Al thoroughly examine you?”

Watching the two with amusement, Alice crawled into her own bed. But she made sure to keep looking with a mischievous stare.

“Wh-Whoa! Don’t take that off! Don’t touch me! Ow!” said Tesfia.

“I told you so. I might not be a healing Magicmaster, but I know enough that I can check your condition,” said Alus.

“Then call for a healing Magicmaster instead! Why does this kind of thing keep happening to me?” said Tesfia.

“You need to know when to give up. Be quiet. I’m not telling you to get naked; just show me your stomach,” said Alus.

“Ugh...” Tesfia rolled up her hospital gown, revealing bandages wrapped mainly around her abdomen. Thankfully, they weren’t stained with blood.

“Looks like a skilled healing Magicmaster treated you. The flow of mana has calmed too,” said Alus.

By lightly touching her abdomen, he could tell that proper healing magic had been performed. Meanwhile, Tesfia was desperately holding her gown to prevent any more skin from being exposed. Upon closer inspection, he saw a brace around her ribs and sternum.

“Did your lungs get hurt too?” he asked.

“No, according to the healing Magicmaster, it was just the ribs... That’s enough, isn’t it?! If you move that hand further up, I’m going to get angry. And I’ll throw up blood too,” said Tesfia.

“What kind of a threat is that? Well, just from looking at your abdomen, I can see the rest is probably fine too.”

When Alus finally removed his hand, Tesfia quickly closed her hospital gown and grabbed the blanket to cover up her upper body.

“More importantly, why did you come here? Did you just come to lecture us rather than to see how we’re doing?” asked Tesfia.

“Are you still at an age where you want me to lecture you?” Alus asked, sitting back down feeling exasperated. He really had just come to check up on Tesfia and Alice, and he did not intend to give them any lectures or advice.

But as someone who had put time in to train them, he was bothered they had so casually put their lives in danger. At the same time, he knew if they were truly serious, he had no way of stopping them. Alus had witnessed more than his fair share of people giving up their lives to save their allies.

There were times when people made no sense, no matter how hard one tried to reason with them with logic. In the end, each person decided how he or she would use their life. Alus had emotionlessly seen people follow such shallow impulses countless times. But he could never understand it himself, which was why he had no choice but to believe there was a reason for it.

So Alus accepted it rather than rejecting it.

“Nothing I can say will change anything. That was just the kind of action you took. If your actions had been based on some kind of logic and calculations, I’d have to lecture you on your misconceptions. But in the end, you can only compensate for a lack of estimation with experience. You may get lucky and

continuously barely survive, then when you look back on the path you took, you will learn the heights you stand on now. That may be part of what makes you a Magicmaster,” said Alus.

But he knew that following that method, their luck would eventually run out. From his point of view, Tesfia and Alice were still inexperienced. He wondered how many more times would they need to risk their lives to reach the heights, and the thought of that long road made him dizzy.

For the time being, Alus raised his head and looked out the window at the indigo-tinted sky past.

“It looks like you two were nervous I’d scold you, but that just means you’re aware that you failed somewhere. So just make sure that you don’t repeat the same failure. The path to becoming a Magicmaster continues, and it’s not like there’s no hope for you. You’ve survived not once but twice now,” said Alus.

They didn’t immediately realize what Alus was talking about...but after thinking about it for a moment, Tesfia and Alice realized at the same time. In an extracurricular lesson, they had stood against Fiends without faltering. That was another time they’d survived in a battle to the death. That experience had been the first step on the road to becoming a Magicmaster.

“Well, if you die, that’s the end of your story. But for students, you’ve started off with some good experience,” said Alus.

“What part of this is a good experience?!” asked Tesfia.

“Yeah, it sure doesn’t seem good,” said Alice.

“Is that what you think? Well, one day you will understand its true value. And if I had to say something more...” Alus trailed off.

“Yes?” Tesfia timidly urged him to continue.

“You should have at least taken down one of the attackers. Getting a one-sided beatdown doesn’t have any benefits,” said Alus.

“Ugh!” Tesfia and Alice looked bitter as they heard his words.

Having said his piece, Alus stood up, but a voice called out, asking if he was leaving already.

“I have something I need to do, so I don’t have time for you novices. Besides, Senniat is waiting outside to give you a real scolding,” said Alus. He could clearly imagine the two of them unable to say anything to Senniat, as she apologized profusely.

“Aha ha, that’s true. You’ve got a point there.” Alice scratched her cheek and nodded.

“She even apologized to us,” said Tesfia, struggling to endure her feelings.

After saying he’d visit again, Alus left the infirmary. Even though the girls heard that everything had been settled, they still bombarded Senniat with questions about what happened.

Alus moved over to an old building in the corner of the Institute that was used for research. The fact that it was so far from the main building was proof of how dangerous the research performed there was.

Neither Alus nor Loki had used the facility before, so it felt somewhat fresh to them. Similar to the training grounds, it was built to be resistant to mana and impacts. While not state-of-the-art, the walls and ceiling were clearly made with military-grade magic-resistant material.

Because it required room for experiments, it was so large it was hard to get a complete picture of the building. There was a separate five-story building attached to it. It had been used as a shelter after the attack, so there were students and teachers here and there, but only a few would come this far out. Most victims evacuated to the dorms instead.

Using Sisty’s authority, they had equipment brought to a room on the second floor, including the documents from the shelf Lilisha had dropped. The room was large enough, but with all the equipment acting as obstacles, it felt cramped and labyrinthine.

By the time all the work was done and the equipment was brought in, it was already night. But because of all the night-lights everywhere, it didn’t really feel like night. After what had happened today, the Institute would likely not sleep for the time being, and guards were on patrol all throughout the night.

The Institute had immediately been closed, and students were sent to their

guardians, although some of the students had decided to stay in the dorms. There were now guards and soldiers everywhere, reassuring them that this was probably the safest place they could be.

Alus had Loki get some rest as he started his research. He sat down at a simple table and cheap chair and opened the Four Books of Fegel again.

He noticed that each entry used a different encryption. Some even mixed Lost Spells into the encryption, and it was so unbalanced that it was hard to imagine only one person had written it.

Now then, how much can I decipher...? thought Alus.

Alus had no need to try to figure out if this book was real or fake. The moment he had laid eyes on it, he had instinctively understood it. Waves of information he had no knowledge of and various flashes of inspiration were being crammed into his brain. It would take complex analysis and research later to understand why he could read it.

Still, not only are the descriptions complicated, the contents of the book aren't well organized either. Most of it is magic-related, and the topic on Minerva is more AWR-oriented, thought Alus.

As expected, the Four Books of Fegel were divided into separate volumes, and he anticipated that he wouldn't understand the whole picture until all four of them were gathered. He held only one-fourth of the whole.

After first sending detailed information and the scanned data to the analysis terminal, he turned his attention to the virtual screen that displayed the results. It was black with an error message indicating that the data was corrupted.

Huh? A reading error?!

"Is it a problem with the equipment, or could it be...?"

Was it perhaps due to the unique material that made up the Four Books of Fegel? If that was the case, there was nothing he could do. If possible, he would have liked to have read the other entries.

"It looks like it might have something written about special abilities. I might even come to understand something about my own abilities..."

The research and explanation of Gra Eater was actually Alus's foremost research goal. By going through this book, he felt like he might be able to reach an answer. But with no other options right now, Alus slumped his shoulders and suppressed his endless desire for knowledge.

When he reached the last page, his hand stopped. The language here was easier to understand.

"Does this say that it's a fragment of the Akashic Records?! I see, I was wondering what kind of genius had written this...but I see that they touched that too."

In Vanalis, a record had directly engraved itself into his brain, containing a fragment of wisdom that he—no, nobody—knew of. Remembering that, he could finally understand. The seeming omniscience of these books was because the author had glimpsed into the Akashic Records. In other words, the Four Books of Fegel were a transcription of the Akashic Records.

Considering that it says fragment, even this is just a portion of the entirety. But on my end, I feel like I didn't gain that much knowledge. If anything, it's like my memories are only dredged up when I touch upon unknown-yet-relevant information. Like I can only draw on knowledge passively, pondered Alus.

Alus didn't know how, but it was clear that the author of the Four Books of Fegel had managed to draw out more information from the Akashic Records than he had. Perhaps there was an issue with the brain's memory limit.

"Still, this is ridiculous. Brains that exceed mine, the current rank 1. What even are the Akashic Records in the first place? Where in this world does this massive amount of information even exist? I can only hope that it's not somewhere ridiculous, like another dimension."

As Alus wondered where he'd extracted the knowledge from, he felt like he'd stepped outside the realm of human knowledge. Even so, a thought flashed through his mind. "Could it be...Fiends?"

If there was anything he could think of to explain where it all came from, it would be an alien existence. And in this world, the only thing that came to mind were Fiends.

Either way, not being able to actively dig through it myself is just too inconvenient, he thought. It was now past 10 p.m. I need to wrap this up by reviewing the Minerva-related information in the Four Books of Fegel. As reluctant as I might feel about it, I can only really half-assed read this.

After reading through the encrypted passages and staring at the strange drawings projected in his mind, Alus pulled out his license from his pocket and used its calling function. It was rare for him to contact someone himself, but he didn't want to miss the opportunity.

"Lord Vizaist," Alus said, and the other end of the call was silent for a while.

There was an eerie silence until a familiar deep voice answered, "Alus. It's unusual to see you grow impatient."

"Yes, well, if all I did was receive my salary without doing any work, even the Governor-General would get sick of me," said Alus. "So did you find anything?"

More than half a day had passed since Dante had escaped from the Institute, but Alus hadn't heard from Vizaist.

"There has been no progress on information regarding the target," said Vizaist. "I heard about the attack on the Institute, but we can't spend any time on that. With the escaped prisoners running amok, we've got our hands full."

"I see. By the way, did you hear about Felinella?" asked Alus.

"Of course. It seems she got too involved. My daughter's failure is my responsibility," Vizaist said, his voice stiff, but it was easy to imagine his face on the other end of the call. They had worked together for a long time, after all.

"You jest. You don't need to give me that sort of extraordinary canned phrase. I am glad that her life isn't in danger, but I've heard about what she did. Apparently, she single-handedly defeated Mir Ostayka, a top-class magical criminal. That's certainly something to be proud of, even for a doting parent like you," said Alus.

"Alus, you've drifted too far off-track. And who are you calling a doting parent!" exclaimed Vizaist.

After a moment's pause, a bitter voice replied, "Oh, who could I be talking

about? Well, frankly, taking down Mir should be a big deal. Not only does that weaken them, I can move more easily as well. All I really need to do now is pursue Dante.”

“I suppose so. The other escaped prisoners have been mostly cleaned up too,” said Vizaist.

“I see. But I’ll tell you just in case... It seems that the last trump card up their sleeves is some strange drug that transforms them into Fiends. It’s hard to believe, but just check with Aferka,” said Alus.

Vizaist responded slowly, “I have already heard about it, but as you say, it’s hard to believe.”

“Also, I believe that Godma Barhong’s secret research is related to it,” said Alus.

An audible gulp could be heard from the other end of the call. “What! So the results have already been leaked?!”

“Maybe. Considering how one of the Four Books of Fegel that I caught a glance of at that site has now disappeared, Kurama might be pulling the strings behind the scenes,” said Alus.

“Then we don’t have enough hands to go around,” said Vizaist. “Or fighting power.”

“It’s probably too late for that now. For the time being,” said Alus, “leave Dante to me.”

“Do you have any leads on him?” Vizaist asked bluntly, but with a hopeful tone.

“Yes, something like that. And I’d like to borrow some help,” the rank 1 Magicmaster responded.

“How many? I’ll send some your way no matter what it takes,” said Vizaist.

“Three should be enough. I’ll be sending you a suspicious coordinate, so keep a lookout there.” Alus then used a virtual keyboard to send the coordinates to Vizaist’s terminal.

It didn’t really seem worth sending Vizaist’s precious men on lookout duty,

and he said as much. “This seems rather exaggerated just to mark a suspicious location. Is there something that’s bothering you, Alus? If you want, I can make a formal request to the military instead, using my authority to have them send Magicmasters that will work for me.”

“No, your subordinates will be more reliable. Besides...”

As Alus hesitated, an irritated snarl came from Vizaist. It seemed that he’d confirmed the coordinates that Alus had sent him. “Alus...I want you to tell me what is here.”

“To be honest, there is a hole in the barrier that even the military can’t detect,” explained Alus. “According to information from Aferka, the Womruina family might have guided the escaped prisoners, which is how they were able to so easily infiltrate Alpha. The barrier is strong on the outside but can be surprisingly fragile on the inside. It might be premature to judge based on just that hole, but the barrier is thin and hard to perceive. I’ve considered all sorts of things, but this is the only place I could think of where the escaped prisoners could come in from the outside without being found out.”

The military’s surveillance system wasn’t so lax as to just let escaped prisoners waltz on in. Although there was still the possibility they’d entered through another nation, Dante seemed to have been after Minerva from the start, and Womruina was a major force in Alpha. So it would have been the shortest and most rational way to infiltrate Alpha.

“Understood. I’ll make the preparations,” said Vizaist.

“Thank you.” Alus hoped that Vizaist understood the meaning in him finding that “hole” and revealing it to Vizaist. And he wanted to believe that Vizaist would take the necessary precautions.

It was pretty good for cunning tricks, and it was a good ace card to play too, thought Alus.

It was the slightest break in the absolute defense that the Tower of Babel offered and the only Achilles’ heel of Alpha’s defenses. It was a secret path that Alus had discovered by chance or perhaps the only possible means of escape from this world. But for now, it would serve as a onetime-use trap to get a huge catch.

Regardless of Alus's thoughts, Vizaist didn't question why he had such information. He had another question instead. "What? You have an affiliation to Aferka? Well, I was certainly struggling until they came out of the shadows, so perhaps it's not for me to say."

That was a very thorny coming from Vizaist, considering that Alus had served under him for many years. Now wasn't the time for deception, so Alus spoke his mind. "Well, less Aferka and more Lady Cicelnia."

"I bet. If possible, I want to avoid performing the same work as them," said Vizaist.

Vizaist worked as an intelligence unit that had a similar role to Aferka. And with Aferka now serving as the ruler's limbs, there would probably be situations in the future that made it difficult for Vizaist to act.

"With Lady Cicelnia at the top, you will be at a disadvantage," said Alus. "Well, considering how their commander, Lilisha, is acting, I doubt she would get in your way."

"What's that, you actually trust the Frusevan's youngest daughter?" asked Vizaist. "Sheesh, if you have the time to be infatuated with that brat, you should make a move on Feli already."

Alus didn't have a wide enough variety of conversational topics that he could keep up with that joke. He could only curtly sigh and once again turned his attention to the person on the other end of the line.

"It's not so much that I trust her; it's more that I believe she won't betray me. Also if Felinella hears you say that, she's going to hate you. She's pretty calm for her age, but if there's a crack in your father-daughter bond, it will have an impact on your job."

"Th-That's not possible! Not for her...!" said Vizaist.

"Yeah sure, I'm hanging up now. It's good to hear your voice again. I feared that you'd screwed up against the prisoners and were groaning in a hospital bed," said Alus.

"I will pretend I didn't hear that last bit. We can save the next call for when things have been cleared up."

“Got it.”

Although it was far from a business talk with casual talk mixed in, their conversation fit comfortably into Alus’s sensibilities. More importantly, it reminded him of the work behind the scenes and sharpened his senses whether he liked it or not.

Alus put his license away and realized Vizaist hadn’t used his usual catchphrase “once this mission is over.” It was just something Vizaist usually said to himself, but it had become a habit after he started leading the special forces Alus had belonged to.

But that happened from time to time, and Alus shook off the slight sense of discomfort and turned towards his desk. Now, it was time for work.

“I hope I’m wrong but... No, if Dante has gone after Minerva, it can’t be wrong. Not to mention that he seems to be a guy with some class among a pack of bloodthirsty beasts.”

Alus sharply saw Dante’s nature. He was a merciless man who wouldn’t hesitate to perform a massacre if there was a need for it, but he wasn’t the kind to find pleasure in it. As proof of that, Alus could point to the fact that Dante hadn’t killed anyone during the attack on the Institute. He’d left the violence to the others, and it was his subordinates, let off their leashes, who had shed blood unnecessarily.

And from what he’d heard from Sisty, his words and actions regarding Minerva showed that he was surprisingly intelligent and reasonable for a leader of escaped prisoners. If Alus were to guess, he’d say Dante was the type to enjoy the process of playing a game by moving bloodstained pawns around. From his personal experience, that kind of person was particularly strong in a fight.

Having run out of things to do quicker than he’d expected, he wanted to properly investigate the Four Books of Fegel, but he didn’t have enough time for that either. Instead, he put one of the knife-type AWRs he’d gotten from Loki the other day on the tabletop. As it belonged to someone else, he couldn’t be careless with it.

After moving the work desk, he fixed the AWR in clamps. Loki’s assignment

with the magic formula had already started taking shape thanks to her efforts. From what Alus had seen, it was certainly theoretically possible.

So it was a good way to make use of his spare time.

Although it was a temporary laboratory, there was plenty of equipment and tools, as well as many other items brought over from Alus's room. Taking a needlelike pen, Alus dexterously used it to engrave several marks on the hard AWR. He worked slowly and took his time, and his work finally ended as the date changed.

As he looked around, he found a sofa pushed into the corner and laid down on it. Returning to the dorm now was too much of a pain, and on days like these, where he slept didn't really change anything. Eventually Alus fell asleep, keeping his killer instincts and coldheartedness near the surface of his consciousness.

Those senses spread and thinned out like oil on water and eventually swallowed his consciousness. Like that, he could entrust himself to his instincts and throw himself into an intense battle immediately upon waking. After everything the escaped prisoners had done, he needed to be able to repay them in kind.

Three hours later, Alus woke up. He had no particular time in mind for getting up, but he had a feeling that things would start before morning approached.

As he opened his eyes, he found Loki next to him. She was sitting on the floor by the sofa, dressed up and breathing softly.

"Good morning, Sir Alus," she said.

"I'm surprised you knew when I'd wake up," he answered.

"No, I got plenty of rest myself and just happened to wake up earlier," the spotter responded.

"I see," Alus said as he got up and put his hand on her silver hair. As he patted her head, she looked a little ticklish. He saw that all of the equipment he would need was already in place in a corner of the room. It was quite a lot that she'd brought over from the laboratory.

“I have also brought over some more clothes. What will you do about your clothing?” She really was thoughtful. Almost overly so.

Loki was in a military uniform, but Alus chose a simpler outfit.

“You might be fine like that, but I can’t wear a military uniform when working behind-the-scenes,” said Alus.

“Excuse my lapse in judgment,” she said.

“Well, I can’t tell if you can call this behind-the-scenes anymore, but just in case... Wouldn’t want any civilians seeing it and adding more hassle.”

Alus put on black slacks, changed his shirt, and put on an overcoat. Once Night Mist was at his hip, the two dashed out of the room without a word. Regardless of whether or not he got word from Vizaist’s subordinates, Alus had a final destination in mind.

“Now, let’s go wrap things up,” he said.

“Yes, Sir Alus. By the way, did you find something in the Four Books of Fegel?” Loki curiously asked as soon as they started running. There were many guards on duty in the Institute, as well as skilled Magicmasters keeping a close eye on things. They were still on high-alert.

Running across the roofs of the dark Institute, Alus and Loki could see a huge hole in the training grounds. Even then, the casualties of the Human Fiends were mostly limited to the guards.

Blending in with the darkness, Alus and Loki ran through the Institute in a flash. For better or worse, a ringtone came from Alus’s license twice and then stopped. As he put his hand back in his pocket, he said just one thing. “Let’s hurry.”

With that, the two left a gust of wind as they disappeared.

Eighty-Seventh Chapter

Less than Human

Alus looked up at the sky with a sense of foreboding. He confirmed the shimmering of the wall ahead of him. Near it were Vizaist's subordinates who had appeared from the thicket.

After confirming Alus, they nodded once and returned to hiding in their previous positions. No matter how many times he saw them, they never seemed familiar. As expected of Vizaist's men, they were well disguised.

Now, how was the weather in the Outer World? What was the temperature and humidity? Alus braced himself and stared at the frayed spot in the barrier that separated the Outer World from the Inner World.

"There will probably come a time where I will have to unravel this," Alus said.

"Unravel what?" Loki said.

"The principle behind the Tower of Babel's barrier," Alus said as he stared at the veil of light that acted as the great shield to protect all of humankind.

"Really?! It has been a secret for so long... But I suppose so. While it might be the wisdom of humankind, the details aren't known at all. I have heard rumors that only the rulers and a handful of people really know," said Loki.

"Yeah, well, Babel has always attracted interest because of how large it is, and the barrier itself is easy to approach. Yet not even the foremost scholars have been able to replicate its effects. Maybe it's not a secret, and more just something that nobody actually knows at all," said Alus.

"You jest. Then it would be impossible to maintain or manage," said Loki.

"Indeed... Well, that's enough idle talk."

The next moment, Alus's presence became far sharper. It was like the very composition and even color of the air had changed.

It was a transformation that was impossible for her to copy. She hoped that it was just a matter of training and mental fortitude, but the air around Alus would not allow for even such a simple question. She wondered what was different between her and Alus.

Anyways, the change wasn't due to spells or mana. If anything, the barrier brought up an instinctual fear. When touching this, one was put in a deadly situation, whether or not they liked it. Faced with something with absolute strength, the body naturally curled up.

Staring at her esteemed Alus, Loki prepared the mana in her body and sharpened her mind. She wasn't staying at his side to be a burden.

With that, the two passed through the boundary between the human realm and the Outer World, immersing themselves in the real world. As expected, the outside air chilled to the core, and their breath turned white. It would be a strain on their bodies until they got used to the temperature difference.

Like Alus, Loki covered her body in a thin film of mana. From now on, they would be in Fiend territory.

They would need to find the escaped prisoners and finish them off. It was still the middle of the night, and it would take some time before the sun rose. Typically, moving at this hour when Fiends were particularly active was practically suicide, but Alus must have had a reason for choosing this time of day.

Eventually, Alus started running without a word. Loki followed without missing a beat. However, he moved at a far greater speed than in the Inner World, and just keeping up with him took everything Loki had. They weren't the movements of the Magicmaster that Loki knew.

No, this was another side of Alus.

If she only tried to look at the side of him that was convenient to her, she didn't have the right to stand by his side. But what frightened her most was how his movements didn't make any sound at all. It was like she was chasing a shadow.

Even so, she ran as fast as she could to chase after his back. Just as she was

about out of breath, Alus suddenly stopped. Lying on the ground in front of them were the bodies of dead Magicmasters. Judging from how dried the blood pooling around them was, they had probably met their end not long ago.

“Talk about unlucky,” said Alus.

Loki tightly pursed her lips and nodded. They certainly had been unlucky. There were five bodies in total, enough for a squad; they had likely been here at the order of the military. Considering they hadn’t been eaten, it wasn’t the result of Fiends but humans.

If the people they were meant to protect had killed them, how could that be anything other than unlucky? It was a truly miserable scene. They were all dead, with no need to confirm their vital signs.

“Did they cross blades...I wonder,” said Loki.

“If you could call it that. It likely ended in an instant. There’s no signs of them stopping to fight back,” said Alus.

“Many of them have injuries on their back. Were they trying to retreat perhaps? The most heavily damaged body is a man who looks like he was serving as the rear guard.”

Alus looked at the body that Loki pointed to.

“Do you know them?” asked Loki.

“No, I can’t say that I’ve seen any of them before,” said Alus. “Even though we’re all Magicmasters from Alpha.”

Loki also didn’t recognize them. But the uniforms were from Alpha, so they were their fellow countrymen. Because of that and the state that their bodies were in, Loki shuddered and felt helpless. However, Alus showed no concern for Loki’s mental state as he bluntly examined the bodies and analyzed the situation. To Loki, that seemed to be a sign of trust he had in her.

“Loki, use your detection. It’s a pain, but we’ll launch an attack and take them out. Besides, the Outer World is our battleground,” said Alus.

“Okay!” said Loki. She didn’t question his instructions for a moment. She sent out her mana sonar, ignoring any chance for an ambush. The first thing she

realized was that there were no Fiends around them for some reason. Even the ones she could just barely feel were far away, which meant...

“It doesn’t matter if they find out we’re pursuing them,” said Alus. “It seems they’re taking out the Fiends in their path anyways. Since they’re wasting time, that gives us an edge.”

A mana sonar was less effective the further away the target was and even less so when it was used against people. And if they were intentionally hiding their mana, Loki wouldn’t be able to do anything.

A skilled user could even sense the presence of mana sonar. As magical criminals were always in a position to be pursued, many were well versed in such matters. And considering how strong these escaped prisoners were, they were probably skilled in such tactics.

“I can’t sense the escaped prisoners,” said Loki.

“That’s fine. They won’t get away. So this makes for a great cue for the start of our game of tag.”

Alus also had Loki use her mana sonar to put pressure on the escaped prisoners so they’d know the hunter was closing in. They proceeded south from Alpha, slightly in the direction of Rusalca. Eventually, the path they followed no longer revealed any remnants of Fiends or even mana residue.

It doesn’t make sense. Why go through the effort of scattering the mana residue? wondered Alus. *And all traces of Fiends have been erased. Are they just walking down a peaceful path without a single Fiend in sight? No, that’s not possible.* Alus furrowed his brow.

“As expected from infamous escaped prisoners from the Trojan Prison, they won’t make it easy. Well, the results will be the same either way,” he said.

“Sir Alus...!” When he heard the tension in Loki’s voice, Alus stopped running. Ahead of him were giant trees with undulating roots. On top of them were several pairs of sharp eyes looking down at them.

They had finally gotten a glimpse of the enemy—two people’s silhouettes showed in the faint light of dawn.

Loki behind him swiftly pulled out her knife-type AWRs.

“Three, huh? Loki, back me up,” said Alus and took off running.

“Understood,” answered Loki.

His speed exceeded human limits. Anyone would be slow to react to him disappearing with his first step.

As Alus ran towards the two men, the slimmer man’s eyes opened wide and his thin smile disappeared from his lips. But Alus was focused on the man behind him, the man sitting with his legs spread wide... He was no doubt the priority target—Dante. He looked just as Sisty had described him.

“Tsk...” The slim man clicked his tongue and thrust out his right hand as Alus got closer. Alus dodged it at the last moment, and the slim man swung with his knife as the Magicmaster passed him.

At the same time, on the opposite side of the man, Alus’s left, another man appeared from the shade of a tree, where he’d been hiding. He swung his pitch-black right arm to perfectly exploit Alus’s opening. While half his face was still hidden in shadows, the ambusher wore a twisted grin.

“There’s the third,” Alus said quietly.

In the next instant, the man’s pitch-black arm was sent flying with a spray of blood. Not even the man himself understood how his arm had been cut off at the shoulder. But the slim man, who’d been first to try and intercept Alus, showed no sign of shock. Instead he steadily swung his knife at Alus.

The blade was heated in an instant. It was the same blow that he had used on Tesfia. Rather than coming from some kind of power, it obviously relied on extraordinary acceleration. But regardless of whether or not Alus knew that this was the attacker who had defeated Tesfia...Alus didn’t even pay him any attention.

With a somewhat surprised look on his face, the slim man cast his spell. All that was left was to swing the dagger as fast as possible through the shortest distance available. However, a flash of lightning dashed across his sight, and a person appeared right before him in an instant.

The next moment, the scene played through the man's mind frame by frame. The small silver-haired girl who had appeared unleashed a kick to the side of his head faster than even his knife moved.

This happened before the other man's arm touched the ground. The slim man had no choice but to release the ability in his arm and focus entirely on evasion. He forcibly sped up the first step of his movement, moving his body and allowing him to just barely dodge the kick.

With slight relief, he smiled. She missed her wide kick, and the recoil was so large that her center of gravity would be fixed, meaning he could make the next move before she could. That was the established norm in martial arts. The person who'd dodged a wide attack had the chance to counterattack.

Returning to his usual center of gravity, the man used his knife to target Alus once more, rather than Loki. However, Alus kept looking forward. Since he'd left Loki to cover him, he didn't need to take even the slightest notice of the man.

The man believed that such a belief in a partner was a fatal flaw; therefore, he wanted to destroy that delusion. However, Loki's next move went against his ideal. She immediately launched her next attack, a lightning-clad kick, from a collapsed posture.

He wouldn't be able to dodge this one. He couldn't have anticipated a second attack unleashed at this speed. He crossed his arms to block but felt an impact like a giant iron hammer had slammed into him. A crack ran across the dry surface of the ground where he'd braced his feet.

However, the impact aside, the attack wasn't powerful enough to blow through his guard. He was fortunate that his opponent had been small and light. The slim man clicked his tongue as he felt how numb his arms were and glanced towards the ambusher who'd have his arm cut off.

He saw Alus grab the man's head and rip him out of the shadows. Next, his head was slammed into the ground before he even realized his arm was flying through the air or could feel fear from seeing his opponent's terrifyingly fast movement.

A flower of blood bloomed on the ground, and a beat later, his arm landed

with a heavy thud. Alus followed up by using a mana blade to stab his heart and make sure he was dead.

“Loki, you deal with him,” Alus said and took off towards Dante without waiting for an answer.

Loki nodded and confronted the escaped prisoner she’d exchanged blows with and spoke his name. “Marchess Peeket...it’s a fight from the death from here on.”

“I am impressed, you know! I haven’t been going around announcing my name. Are you a student too?” Marchess asked with a look of contempt on his face.

Instead of answering, Loki stared at her opponent. “Did the numbness in your arms go away? I’m glad you’re so slow for someone who was supposed to be confined in the fourth layer.”

“Is that one of the latest jokes going around among students? Unfortunately, this old man’s been locked up for a long time, so I can’t keep up,” Marchess said, the air around him changing. It was a sudden change, like he’d taken off the deceitful exterior he’d been wearing.

“You asked if I’m a student too, didn’t you? Based on your techniques, I take it you’re the one who hurt Ms. Tesfia?” asked Loki.

“Ah, you mean that energetic redhead. I only beat her within an inch of her life, so forgive me. Or maybe she died after that?” he asked.

“Not at all. She’s still alive, like you said.”

“Good to hear. Let her know I’m sorry for the hole in her stomach...or actually, don’t bother. Maybe I’ll do it myself after I’ve killed you. I can even ask about her home and give her a get well soon present in the form of her dead parents,” he said, looking at Loki with a sadistic glare.

But Loki didn’t feel a thing from his scummy words or actions. “By all means. But I wonder what you plan to do? After all, you’re going to die here and become food for Fiends.”

“I just don’t get students’ jokes. Well, you seem to have some skill at least.

That little redhead was just sickening... She just jumped in to fight to play hero and save her friends and teacher despite the difference in power. She was so pure and straight I wanted to throw up. Is the Institute trying to mass-produce stuff like that?" Marchess grinned and his shoulders shook.

Loki also had an opinion on Tesfia's foolhardy behavior, but Alus seemed to see it differently. While he condemned Tesfia's foolishness, he also seemed to acknowledge it in some way.

That was why she said, "I think it's stupid. But a certain someone acknowledges that. They might even see it as a virtue that they don't have. So I will acknowledge that part. Everyone has flaws, and that's far better than someone full of nothing but malice, like you."

"I see, so you're avenging your friend," he answered.

"Not from my point of view at least. Killing you is the latest assignment I've been given. It's not often you come across someone who has committed such grievous crimes, so this is a good opportunity to measure my killing skills," said Loki.

"Then let's get this started. I'll teach you how harsh the world is." Marchess dexterously toyed with the knife with his fingertips and gave her a crooked smile.

Loki didn't really know how to kill. But she felt that the man before her would make for a great test subject. She needed to become more like Alus. All she needed to do was replace the target of her hostility from Fiend to human.

Loki immediately used Force to raise the physical limits of her body. Next, her figure disappeared in a bolt of lightning. With a tail of lightning flashing behind her, she appeared right in front of Marchess. However, he showed no sign of planning to counterattack. Instead, he had his eyes closed and stood still as if meditating.

Loki thrust her knife at him, but just before it touched him, Loki disappeared again and appeared at his side to launch a sideways attack. She'd been careful, throwing in a feint before going for the kill.

But she suddenly came to a full stop and jumped back. In the next moment a

knife's blade swung through the space she'd occupied.

He's fast! she thought.

Thrusting and pulling—with that simple back-and-forth motion, Marchess was able to slightly exceed the speed of Loki's force.

A few strands of Loki's hair fell towards the ground. She took a deep breath. It was such a sudden stop that the recoil put a strain on her heart, and she felt a shudder from the depths of her body. If she had been even a beat later, the knife would have been thrust between her eyes.

"Aren't you careful? You've got a decent bit of margin in the distance between us," Marchess taunted.

In a sense, it was her first time going up against a foe with such a clear intent to kill her. Her caution had saved her.

"Hmm, not bad." Marchess touched the edge of his blade with satisfaction. "Yes... I'm impressed. It seems you understand the boundaries required in killing."

Immediately, the coarse and rough air around him disappeared. His words had a form of refined madness to them, and even his personality seemed to have transformed. His tone differed from what it had been during the attack on the Institute.

In fact, his personality changed from moment to moment, like a stage actor. It was a fetter he'd imposed on himself to survive the underworld. He had created an observer in the depths of his consciousness to objectify himself as a killer.

So Marchess Peeket had two personalities, two masks—one for objectivity and one for subjectivity. They were complex and bizarre personalities that seemed to be acting to confirm what killing for pleasure was like, but at the same time, it didn't seem to be an act.

While he was true to his desires, he could control it as necessary, which was a far throw from someone with a morally bankrupt personality. Whenever Marchess murdered, his awareness of it was always poor. He only had a vague

sense that a person he was acting as had committed the crime.

While most of the time, murder was left to the crude and violent personality, there were exceptions. For example, such as when he encountered a worthy opponent that gave him a sense of tension. The other personality, which had been watching from the subconscious, rose to the surface.

Marchess Peeket was a man who had taken lives in all manners of ways. When he was captured, he was charged with killing over thirty people, but it was said that the actual number was far higher. Killing was practically a daily routine to him.

At times they were planned; at times they were for pleasure. And at times they were on impulse...and finally, at times he killed of his own volition.

“That’s enough of the tasting. It’s time to get to killing. I’ll finish this up before the sky lightens up,” he said to himself, focusing his sharpened mana into his knife.

Loki, with her sharp mana-sensing abilities, realized for the first time that it was an AWR made to kill. The magic formula applied to the blade was hidden by the handle. It was most likely similar in structure to Tesfia’s Kikuri.

But no matter how sophisticated the camouflage was, Loki had seen Alus’s mana control up close and she could now skillfully read the flow of mana.

“I see. You might be a twisted scum, but you are still a Magicmaster. Then I will act as one myself.” Loki converted her mana into electricity and discharged it into her surroundings. As she drew her knives, she unleashed a blindingly bright lightning that pushed away any darkness.

Out of that light, three knives came flying towards Marchess. Clad in lightning, the knives headed straight for Marchess with enhanced speed and penetration ability. However, Marchess seemingly didn’t mind the volley of knives and dodged them with a bare minimum of movements.

That didn’t bother Loki, though. She had already anticipated as much and started running towards the trees on her side at lightning speed. But despite using Force to speed up, Marchess was keeping up.

She took a deep breath and exceeded her limits, putting further strain on her

legs. She held out a new knife as a white flash rose into the sky, and she locked her eyes on the target.

“‹‹*Lightning*››”

With an explosive roar, lightning struck the ground, but he just barely evaded that too, and its effects were limited to scorching the ground where he had just been. After that, the fearsome murderer melted into the darkness.

As I thought, we're matched in speed! Loki thought.

Trying to escape his gaze, she leaped and used several branches as footing, stepping soundlessly on the ground before unleashing her next spell.

“‹‹*Flash*››”

Light cut through the darkness and filtered through the trees. This spell was typically used to blind an opponent, but here it worked similar to a flare. The surroundings turned as bright as day, making some shadows more defined.

“There...!” Loki dropped one of her knives and unleashed Lightning on it. However, she didn't feel any response... But in the next moment she felt a disturbing presence past her shoulder. Without giving her time to turn around, Marchess closed in on the petite girl. He quietly wielded his five, heated fingers.

“Excuse me,” the man said in a gentlemanly whisper.

The magic formula on the knife Loki had dropped started glowing. Immediately, the air around Loki was electrified. With a bursting sound, white smoke appeared as the electrical energy gathered in Marchess's body and turned into a high-voltage current. In one deafening moment, Marchess's body was enveloped in a white explosion of lightning.

Regardless of whether he was lurking in the darkness or not, as a Spotter, Loki wouldn't completely lose sight of him. Moreover, the enemy didn't know about her abilities, so she had created an opening to take advantage of.

Loki kicked off the ground to get some distance, but his hand reached out to grab her clothes. The smell of burnt flesh stung her nose as a fist came flying towards her. Loki crossed her arms in front of her and braced for the attack.

But the fist suddenly changed trajectory and instead a flat palm cleanly struck

Loki's ear. For a moment, she couldn't understand what happened. Her head shook and her vision was flickering.

As her senses returned, she felt pain in her left ear. She felt like her ear canal was blocked, but something was seeping out. When she looked at her hand, she realized blood was running out from her ear.

"Ugh?!" She let out a muffled scream and tried not to take her eyes off the enemy before her. But she felt an inescapable dizziness and pain. Her brain was shaken, and her eardrum had probably ruptured, but she didn't have the time to flinch at something like that.

Pulling herself out of her fading consciousness, she could barely see the man's knife flash in her shaky vision. Fighting back, Loki once more kicked off the ground. She slid forward into the opponent's guard and delivered an upwards palm strike.

"<<Valitra>>!"

Purple lightning radiated from the bottom of her palm, spreading out wide. The flesh around Marchess's abdomen burst, but it wasn't enough to destroy his organs.

Too shallow?! Loki wondered.

At that moment, a sharp pain ran through her thigh. In the corner of her eyes she could see the afterimage of a blade that had moved faster than even her attack and burrowed into her thigh before she could evade or defend against it. And the opponent had evaded fatal damage himself.

But Loki's blow hadn't been in vain. As proof of that, her opponent had slightly missed his mark: the femoral aorta. After hitting her, Marchess backed off, his face contorted as blood dripped down from the edge of his mouth, and he spat out blood.

He was convinced that would have been the finishing blow if not for Loki's attack. But when faced with a lethal attack from so close, even Marchess had to avoid a direct attack.

"So you even use those kinds of flashy moves? Hmph. Looks like I failed to finish you. Well, I've taken a leg, and if you need it, I can drain it of blood."

“I’m afraid that I can’t really hear what you’re saying, but...no thank you.”
Loki stood up and threw a knife, exhaling sharply. Naturally, Marchess easily dodged it by tilting his head. The missing knife only stopped when it hit a tree behind him.

Loki stared at the enemy before her once more. She didn’t know how it worked, but the first motion in any action he did always exceeded the speed of Force. She’d fired Valitra with perfect timing. At worst, the fighters should have taken each other out.

Yet he’d only suffered a minor abdominal wound, while she had taken a heavy blow to her leg. It wasn’t clear what kind of technique he was using, but she at least hadn’t seen the acceleration in successive movements, so it only applied to the first attack.

However, she lacked the information to do any more analysis. She couldn’t make a plan relying on such uncertain assumptions.

Loki readjusted her AWR and released her mana. The mana around her took on the glow of a white lightning as it visibly transformed.

“My nameless brethren whose bodies were burned to ashes, their souls to white flame. Ancestors of old, bring devastation to the enemy before me...”
Loki chanted.

Marchess narrowed his eyes and made his move before Loki could finish her incantation. That first step was so fast that it was almost outside the realm of perception. In an instant, he was right upon her, and all that was left was too swing.

White smoke rose from his knife as the air was burned as he cut towards Loki’s neck. In the next moment, just as it seemed like Loki’s head would fly, she muttered a complete name.

“*«Fire Ikazuchi»*”

With a flash, a fang of light had removed the arm Marchess was swinging. It had burned in an instant, not even leaving ash behind. Not even blood came from the shoulder wound, as it had already been cauterized.

“Aaaarghh.” Marchess clutched at his wound and fell to his knees. He looked

over his shoulder to where the fang of light had come from. There was a strange heat around a knife that was stuck in the tree behind him, and a complicated magic formula was floating in the air.

That explained why his arm had disintegrated. With a pale face, Marchess looked at the mysterious being who had manifested from the knife and taken his arm from him.

It was a beast of white flame and thunder. Its ears stood up and fierce fangs peeked out from its open mouth. White flame made up its mane and tail, and they occasionally burst with burning lightning. It had a body reminiscent of a tiger or wolf.

With shallow breaths, Marchess took a step in desperation. He kicked off the ground to accelerate, and the distant landscape was rapidly closing in, or it should have. Marchess suddenly lost his support and fell behind Loki.

By the time he'd passed by Loki, he had already lost his left leg. Fire Ikazuchi glanced at its prey and instantly carbonized the left leg in its mouth.

Loki hadn't seen the moment itself, but she understood what had happened. Fire Ikazuchi...a Vertex of Thunder, had reacted semiautonomously against a moving enemy.

"Impossible!!! Wh-Wh-What the hell is that thing...?!" Marchess screamed, his face still pressed against the ground.

Loki didn't answer. Instead, she stepped forward, enduring her dizziness.

Ugh, just manifesting it costs a lot of mana, and maintaining it is still draining this much?! she thought.

Loki had been fighting very sparingly with her mana, but Fire Ikazuchi used more mana than Naruikazuchi. And just maintaining it drained mana like she was repeatedly firing off advanced spells. The anemia-like dizziness that washed over her was accompanied by nausea.

But she couldn't fall here. This was a do-or-die situation, and she needed to *do* this. She had selfishly decided to stay by Alus's side, so she had to at least

complete the task he assigned to her.

Loki calmed herself and flicked her knife like a conductor's baton. Marchess squirmed on the ground and pulled out what appeared to be some kind of medicine wrapper from his pocket. He then pushed it into his mouth, dirt and all.



But regardless of what it was...before he could swallow it, Loki finished her spell.

“*⌞Lightning Ray⌟*”

A thunderbolt of judgment rained down on Marchess from above, lighting up the sky with a dazzling glow. When the sound of thunder stopped, Fire Ikazuchi also disappeared, and Loki looked up at the dim sky.

She did not feel a sense of accomplishment. Nor did she feel elated over mastering Fire Ikazuchi in the moment. She had simply brought down judgment on a criminal who deserved it. An indescribable feeling of emptiness came over her.

She wouldn't make excuses such as saying that it was her mission anymore. It wasn't even for Alus. It was an unjustifiable action that she'd done for her own sake. It was neither justice nor evil, just the plain truth that a life had been snuffed out.

She was forced to confront the fact that she had an aptitude for killing as the unpleasant smell of burnt human flesh stuck in her nose.



Having left Marchess to Loki, Alus focused intently on his top-priority target Dante. His senses were sharpened and his consciousness was optimized for killing as efficiently as possible. But perhaps because he'd spent so much time in peace, the switch to this mode was a little less smooth than usual.

Still, as soon as he looked at Dante, he felt somewhat compelled to get serious.

No that's not it, he thought after a pause.

This was probably not an opponent he could hold back against. In an instant, the fetters around his mana were unleashed and a dense wave spread out. Not even Alus could predict how far it would go.

Skilled or not, against this opponent, he couldn't hope for a clean kill.

Even as Dante stood up, the air around him didn't change. Despite the amount of mana pouring out, his expression was the same.

I suppose that's to be expected, Alus thought.

The corners of his lips lifted. And with monstrous lightning speed, Alus reached Dante in the blink of an eye. He pulled back his arm for a simple punch. Dante sneered at the thrusting fist and reached out with his arm to ward it off. But Alus's arm accelerated further, passed through Dante's arm, and struck his cheek. The fist swung with all of his weight behind it, and bones cracked.

Without pause, Alus drew his elbow back as Dante was violently sent flying.

Focusing vast amounts of mana in it, Alus thrust his arm forward, creating a devastating blast. His wind magic forcibly tried to break Dante's posture as he attempted to stand firm. Having gained an advantage, Alus gave chase and tried to follow up from Dante's blind spot. But he suddenly stopped.

Things were falling from far above, one after another. Nearly one hundred or so of them in various forms hit the ground, immediately raised their bodies, and turned their glares on Alus, paying no heed to the impact they'd just suffered.

As if called in, Fiends had suddenly appeared before Alus. It was normally impossible for this many Fiends to rain down from above like hail. There were only so many Fiends that had wings or could glide through the air. Strangely enough, all of the Fiends that had arrived were ground-dwelling Fiends. Large ones. And none of them had wings.

Alus narrowed his eyes and realized the truth.

No wonder there hadn't been any Fiends on the way here. They'd all been kept far up in the air, near the stratosphere, standing by until they could join the fight. Dante must have used an unusual power to set up the ambush. As Alus had that realization, the Fiends bared their fangs and launched themselves at him.

It took some time for Dante to land on his feet after flying a few hundred meters. He wiped away the blood that had spilled from his mouth and looked up. There was a strange glow on the ground. It seemed the opponent had prepared a literal hell for him.

A giant ball of light with the color and heat of a red dwarf star floated in the air. It scorched everything around it. No living creature could survive such

temperatures. And the astronomically hot ball of light was falling to the surface.

It was the spell Astral Sun...but for it to grow to this scale required a monstrous amount of mana. Its brilliance and heat were enough to evaporate anything.

However, Dante fearlessly smiled at the sight of it.

“This would have been dangerous if not for Minerva.” Dante said. And thanks to that unimaginable power, the Astral Sun shrunk until it completely vanished. But it had left behind a scorched wasteland. There were smoldering embers and trails of white smoke all over the place.

Dante grinned over how the visibility had improved. In front of him stood the opponent he’d launched a mass of Fiends at without a single wound.

“Come on now. I gathered quite a few of them too,” he said.

The vast forest behind Alus had transformed into a frozen world. Any signs of life had ceased. An expert-level spell had frozen a wide area. Alus, having eliminated nearly one hundred Fiends in an instant, wore a calm expression. In fact, the mana coming from him didn’t seem to have diminished in the slightest.

“We finally meet, Dante. Performing a flying circus with Fiends was an amusing acrobatic trick,” said Alus.

“Alus Reigin, I don’t want to hear that from you. Phasing through my arm like you’re some sort of ghost. That one hurt. But the first move being just a simple punch wasn’t very smart,” Dante said cynically, wiping blood from his mouth.

“I wouldn’t mind punching you several more times, but that doesn’t seem like it would kill you. There’s also something I want to ask, so I can’t have you die either,” said Alus.

Alus had shown Dante a small trick inspired by his fight with Rayleigh. He’d created a virtual image by transcribing data as close to reality as possible. By hiding his real fist in the decoy, he could conceal its real speed and angle and land a first blow on Dante. It was an effective technique in melee combat, but it wouldn’t likely work a second time.

“Still, it seems like you’re not just relying on that monstrous amount of mana.

No wonder Mekfis was concerned about you. And I could see Kurama struggling,” Dante said with a grin, looking satisfied.

“So Kurama really was involved after all. So?” asked Alus. “No matter how cool you might act, it doesn’t change the fact that you’ll die. You better have Minerva with you, because having to beat its location out of you would be a pain.” Alus still hadn’t spotted Minerva, but he absolutely needed to make sure that he brought it back.

If Sisty ends up stepping down, I’ll end up with more problems myself, he thought. He felt like he already had enough problems and concluded he’d end up with even more if she left.

“I just happened to learn some interesting information in the Four Books of Fegel, so I wouldn’t mind playing around with Minerva for a bit,” said Alus.

The corners of Dante’s lips lifted, and he spread an arm to the side in an exaggerated gesture. “I see. So you are someone who knows the truth and has the qualifications to take a seat. That might be something to look forward to too.”

Dante bent his arm as if pulling the curtains, and the space around his hand suddenly distorted, revealing half of the oldest AWR, Minerva. It was a sphere covered in a black shell, its surface covered in fissure-like cracks in a geometrical pattern. The main body of Minerva peeked out from the cracks, and highly pure mana was leaking out along with a pale light.

Dante returned his arm, as if pulling the curtains back, and Minerva disappeared—not just from sight. Any traces of mana also disappeared.

“Don’t worry. It’s one of Minerva’s defensive functions when activated in the Outer World. I think the function releases when the wielder disappears,” said Dante.

“I see. That’s a relief. It means I can kill you without concern.” Emotion disappeared from Alus’s eyes, and only a deep black reflected in them.

“Oh, those are some scary eyes... Even I, who has lived a life of evil, got a chill from them,” said Dante.

“Don’t worry about it. I was just thinking about how to best harass you. I

figured you should at least hit rock bottom before you die. I'll be taking back Minerva, of course, but I'm not sure if that'll be enough to calm me down," said Alus.

"Hmm? I don't recall doing anything to earn a grudge from you," said Dante.

"Oh, this isn't a grudge...it's just me venting. I know a couple of people in the Institute that you attacked, even taught them a thing or two," Alus responded.

"Ah, did they die? Well, I'm not the one who did it, so I guess it doesn't matter." Dante answered like he was bored before continuing as though puzzled. "But that's strange. You're not the kind to mind if a few of those students are killed. I can tell from those eyes of yours. What's someone on this side trying to act like an upstanding person for?"

Dante had a point. Or rather, Alus had already realized as much. So he wasn't here to get revenge nor was he trying to vent. The fact that Tesfia, Alice, and Felinella had been hurt hadn't appeared before Alus in tangible form. It was just that the thought of losing that place and that time created a faint dissonance in his empty heart. Perhaps it could be described as loneliness...

But it stemmed from those days, which he knew wouldn't last forever. A place to return to, a room to live in, and the peaceful time had all been destroyed alongside the faint connection he felt.

He felt neither clear rage nor sadness. He didn't even feel hatred. Perhaps it was the discomfort he felt as his less-than-human self faced his last bit of humanity.

Alus once again stared at Dante coldly. "The only fortunate thing for you is that Fia, Alice, and Feli all got away with just injuries."

"Why the fuck should I care about those guys. What's this? A Single of all things playing house and getting upset because some people he knows got hurt...? Still, one of those three must be...that redhead huh?"

Dante seemed to recall as he was speaking and spat out what he'd remembered—that girl who should have stopped breathing yet grabbed at his leg. He had reacted violently to the spell she'd unleashed even though he'd understood it was a spell she'd used by reflex because she felt her life was in

danger.

In the Institute, he hadn't dirtied his hands whatsoever, leaving all of the acts of evil to his subordinates, remaining calm and self-disciplined.

"So you're the one who put something in that brat's head... I see. No wonder you want to pretend that you're avenging your beloved pupil."

"I don't know what Fia did. But things will get out of hand for them soon." Alus cast his eyes down and spoke the words that rose to the surface of his consciousness. He couldn't even tell if they were his true intentions; they just came out like his lips were reading a block of text on their own.

"Oh, so that's what that redheaded brat's spell was. You bestowed her with Fegel's Magic, didn't you, Alus Reigin? It looks like you can enjoy yourself. And since you were able to follow me, that means... Ha ha ha ha, you saw the third book of the Four Books of Fegel, didn't you? That's the only way!" Dante said, laughing, finding something in all of this funny.

But his mind was also vigilantly running. *But wasn't Kurama supposed to have a hold of the third book? So he must've stolen it. Yeah, he's really got guts.*

Dante's shoulders shook with amusement. Then he exhaled and turned his insanity-tinged eyes to his opponent, who was as crazy as he was.

Alus showed no sign of discomfort, and as if speaking with the dead, he replied with no emotion in his voice, "That goes for you too. If not, you'd never think to steal Minerva."

Dante's shoulders continued to shake as he laughed. There was a hint of madness mixed in with his uncontrollable excitement. At the same time, the mana that Dante released danced around him, flickering like a bewitching flame.

"Yeah, quite some time ago. Minerva is the core. But that's not all. Minerva is a relic of salvation, and its name is just an alias. It's not its original name. It's Myrkava, an ancient word meaning the moving fortress of god. You know what that means don't you?"

Alus said nothing. But like Dante said, it was a word he had found recorded in the Four Books of Fegel. If it was true, there was a frame to house the core near

the border of Alpha. Since the location was noted in the Books of Fegel, Dante, who'd obtained the core, would no doubt head there next.

"Alus Reigin. I wanted to speak with you once. As people that have the right to sway the future of the world...a clash against Kurama will be inevitable too."

"Don't worry, after finishing you off, I'll crush Kurama too," said Alus.

"Is that so? Even though you're on this side, you'll side with the old humanity?" asked Dante.

"Side, huh... Dante, that doesn't matter. It's just the simple fact that you invaded my territory, so your death is a forgone conclusion," explained Alus.

"Hmph, as people with the right to take a seat, I'd rather not grind each other down," said Dante.

"Give it up. You don't have any more allies," Alus told him.

"Huh? I never had any to begin with. The only thing I have are pawns," said Dante.

Seeing how the tyrannical king of the escaped prisoners, Dante, was so eloquent, Alus decided to keep him talking. There was a possibility that he was still hiding some useful information. But while he did, a ferocious irritation and urge to eliminate him began to take form in Alus. Other miscellaneous thoughts were beginning to sink deeper into the depths of his consciousness...

However, he gave it just a little more time.

"And Ambrosia is another one of those pawns, huh? Where did you get your hands on that?" asked Alus.

"Hah, what good is telling you that going to do? Well, the whole Fiendification thing itself is just ridiculous, and I have no interest in it. Think of it as a bonus. I got it from a Kurama executive called Mekfis. Of course, that's just a fake name, and as far as I know he has changed his name four times already."

"I didn't think you would tell me that much, not that I feel inclined to thank you," said Alus.

"Ha ha, we're cut from the same cloth. So consider it a kind of parting gift. As we both know the truth, a battle is inevitable. Kurama and the seven nations

too. Not to mention that bastard plotting something. At some point, the balance between the seven nations will collapse, and a fight for the world's secrets will begin. If you wanna survive, you gotta look to the outside. In the end, only those with power will rule," Dante said.

"If you're going to talk, cut it out with the riddles. I had to skim through the book in a hurry, and I'm sick of prophetic hints," said Alus.

"Don't be naive. It'll cost you to hear any more... So if you want it, you have to steal it," said Dante.

"Then that's what I'll do."

Mana began to violently blow.

Silence fell as the two awaited the signal to start the battle.

The oldest AWR, Minerva, which Dante had revealed, showed no signs of reacting. Alus had been exposed to it once before during the demonstration at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, and he had intuitively grasped how to connect to it.

Even so, he didn't sense anything. When it came to AWRs, users were usually the first things to come to mind. However, Minerva wasn't just an AWR. Like Dante said, it was also a core, a source of power.

Even Alus could vaguely understand that just connecting to it wouldn't give full access to all of its functions, including the hidden ones. In which case, did it really have a user?

In fact, Minerva likely had functions that Alus didn't understand. He knew they would become clearer when he could examine the entries in the Four Books of Fegel. Of course, to do that its current holder would need to be eliminated.

There was another strange thing going on in regards to users.

Alus had Night Mist, but Dante was unarmed. For Magicmasters, possessing an AWR was normal. Since Dante didn't have one, that meant he must also be using Minerva as an AWR.

It was time to get to work.

Alus was the first to make his move amid the stifling silence. He drew back and threw Night Mist. After Dante dodged it, the blade changed direction and pursued its target, using the automatic tracking of the Auto Chase spell.

Alus took partial control and manipulated Night Mist at high speed. The chain rippled as the black blade followed Dante like a hunting dog. If it struck true, it would cut his body and crush his bones.

But Dante was formidable. Before long, the tracking was knocked off and the tip pierced the ground. Alus had anticipated as much, and he grasped the chain. The sound of the chain rubbing against itself rang out and Night Mist emitted a faint magic light.

As Alus whispered the name Niflheim, and the world turned to ice. While the expansion of ice stopped at Alus's feet, he furrowed his brow.

Dante, who was supposed to have been turned into an ice sculpture, was unharmed. The expansion of Niflheim's ice had for some reason avoided the ground where Dante stood. There was a circle around him left completely untouched.

Dante wordlessly raised his foot and brought it back down to the ground with great force. The impact and accompanying wave of mana shattered the world of ice in a show of force.

It was the first magical phenomenon that Dante had shown, but after what he'd seen, Alus wasn't particularly surprised. The effect seemed to be similar to Alus's own Railpine.

But the way he blocked Niflheim's effects in the first place is different. How did he do that? Alus wondered.

All kinds of speculations and analyses ran through Alus's mind, but lacking information, he made his next move. Space around Dante distorted through some effect that was different from mana. However, by that time Alus had already closed in.

Dante clenched his fist as he saw the mana blade in Alus's right hand move towards his throat. There was a strange twisting space around that as well.

However, it was Alus who had to pull his hand back and dodge an attack from

Dante. And that instinctual dodge proved to be the correct move in the next moment. Dante swung his fist, and even though it never touched the ground, a wide area around it collapsed.

“So you’ve got good instincts, or you already knew about this,” Dante said, raising his fist and amplifying the veil of mana around it.

He had struck the blow just now to see how things played out, but the destruction it wrought on the ground was bizarre. It wasn’t due to air pressure or shock waves, nor was it an attack using coordinates. The way the impact was delayed was also unnatural.

However...that was another piece of information Alus could take in. He brought Night Mist back to his hand and stared coldly at Dante as he formed another plan. Dante met that glance with nonchalance.

“So it seems that it’s true that you can use multiple attributes. Not only are they all of the highest standard, the amount of mana in them isn’t diminished in the slightest. What a shame,” said Dante.

His fearless expression was unchanged, and Dante unleashed his mana again as if to reconfirm his abilities.

“Don’t cry about it. Having a large hand leaves you with plenty to think about it. So how would you like to die?” Alus asked in monotone. Those who heard that would no doubt see a glimpse of how truly frightening he was.

There was a clear difference between a carefree magical criminal and a Magicmaster who embodied order. Many magical criminals were true to their desires, committing crimes out of self-interest. But in the case of Alus, he was required to play the role of necessary evil with absolute power by the nation.

So his decision-making was ruthless and at times inhuman. The essence of the nation’s Magicmaster wasn’t an outburst of instincts but a controllable and intelligent violent device.

The distance between the two closed in an instant. Whatever Dante’s fist was clad in was no doubt lethal. While evading blows that would mean certain death, Alus swung Night Mist at high speeds. Their movements cut through the wind, and your ordinary Magicmaster wouldn’t be able to keep up even if they

sharpened all of their senses.

This exchange of blows, each dodging the other's attacks, continued until Dante lost his patience. He clicked his tongue, spread his fingers into the shape of claws, and swung his hand towards Alus's flank. Alus lowered himself to dodge and launched a kick to Dante's side in return. Then he switched his AWR to his left hand and slashed down with it.

It reached Dante's thigh as he'd aimed for, but it was shallow. Dante must have pulled his leg back by reflex. It was a slight cut on his enemy's leg, but it would have to do for now. The chain drawn behind Alus was at a considerable length behind him and coiling in the air.

Whether he realized that or not, Dante thrust out his left arm to seize the initiative. However, Alus took half a step in and snapped his right hand up to knock it aside. Carrying on with that momentum, he thrust his palm over Dante's heart.

"Ugh?!" Blood spurted from Dante's mouth.

Even then, Alus's expression didn't change. If anything, he was becoming more heartless, as if he was gradually transforming into a machine.

As Dante bent over, Alus followed up with a roundhouse kick to the solar plexus. Dante somehow managed to endure it by bracing himself, and his feet carved up the ground as he was pushed back. Alus continued his attack.

From there, their intense close-combat battle unfolded. To Alus, everything was just a stepping-stone to hit the next attack. He put together an optimal strategy to dodge and block Dante's fist and arms, following the steps to achieve the results he wanted. Without blinking, he used his sharpened vision and mana senses to react to his enemy's movements.

"D-Don't think you can do whatever you want!" Dante bitterly spat out.

The chain fluttered through the air and the tip of Night Mist was suddenly right in front of Dante, who tilted his head at the last moment to dodge it. It grazed his neck. He thrust up a fist from below to counterattack, but Alus manifested a translucent board to kick off and dodge it.

As Alus landed, Dante stomped the ground, creating a shock incomparable to

the previous one and shattering the ground. At the same time, Alus had pulled Night Mist back to his hand and swung it sideways. Dante moved to block the slash of wind. Not only did the slash seem to slow down, it also bent down against Alus's will and carved through the ground.

As I thought, that's his power...! The corners of Alus's mouth lifted.

Alus attempted to step forward, but gravel from behind Dante flew at him at high speeds. In response, Alus gathered the chains of Night Mist and deployed them in front of him as a circular shield.

Dante and Alus's eyes met through the rings of the chain. The gravel had been a bluff to allow him to close in on Alus. In the next moment, the gravel crashed into the chain and shattered.

Entering Alus's blind spot, Dante soundlessly turned his right hand towards Alus. Even though he couldn't see it, Alus swung Night Mist towards the attack by reflex. But before the blade reached Dante, the attack stopped.

Night Mist suddenly became heavier. Suddenly exceeding Alus's strength, Night Mist was sucked towards the ground, pulling Alus's arm with it.

Alus's posture broken, Dante mercilessly attacked. He swung his right hand clad in terrifying power. However, Alus had already let go of Night Mist.

"It's gravity," he muttered and turned on his leg to kick Dante's neck.

The powerful kick sent Dante flying to the side. Alus pulled his AWR back up and lightly shook it.

«*Lightning Slash*»

Roaring thunder enveloped Night Mist with a white light, and the slash of lightning that shot out from it scorched the air it moved through to pierce its target. But as Alus had expected, its trajectory bent. Just before hitting Dante, it curved down and hit the ground instead.

Alus no longer had any doubt. The wind attack from before had also had its trajectory forcibly changed. Then there was the warped space around Dante's fist.

The ability to control gravity was a technique that could probably only be

approached after mastering multiple attributes. Alus could, of course, replicate it to some degree with attribute-less magic, but Dante's seemed slightly different from what Alus knew.

Warping space was probably not the end of it. It had not only bent the wind attack but even the lightning slash, which was relatively free from the concept of mass. That meant it was interfering with the magic formula, reflecting the effects of gravity. It was the equivalent of creating a new classification of gravity-based magic. Normally that was something to be lauded as a major development.

"Minerva is adapting well to me. There's nothing you can do about it even if you know. No matter how much mana you have, Minerva can create a near infinite amount of mana. Though it took some time, I'll have it under complete control soon. Once the link is complete, I will be on par with Kurama, no maybe even more powerful," said Dante.

Dante easily controlled his posture, landed slightly in front of Alus, and wiped more blood from his mouth.

"If chain-spinning acrobatics are fine, I can play tricks too."

Dante gasped at Alus's words. Night Mist appeared from under the ground behind Dante and flew towards Dante's back like an arrow. Sensing danger from behind, Dante hurriedly unleashed a portion of his power. When Night Mist was a few centimeters from stabbing into his back, the phenomenon happened.

Powerful gravity was applied around Dante; it spread out to the chain and even Alus. Instantly, the chain was stuck to the ground, and Alus's shoulders felt so heavy it was as if a boulder had been placed on them.

The blade near Dante's back fell and burrowed into the ground. Alus also bent his knees due to the overwhelming weight. Dante made his move and cut through the wind.

Using his momentum, he kicked up at Alus's chest. The single blow made Alus spew blood and fall back. It had enough power to fell a tree with a single touch and had crushed his sternum in an instant.

Tsk... Alus ground his teeth. He'd put up a barrier of bent space around

himself, but Dante's power deployed over such a wide area had neutralized even that. Dante's real abilities had caught him off guard.

While Alus was still in the air, Dante jumped up and swung his fists down like a hammer. Alus created mana blades from his arm, stretching them into the ground to forcibly stop his body. Despite being upside down, he kicked Dante in the jaw as he approached.

...It wasn't strong enough, thought Alus.

It hadn't been enough to break Dante's posture, and his fists swung down without pause. Alus spun around and crossed his arms to block it, at the same releasing an enormous amount of mana.

The hammer-like blow, heavier than any Fiend's, flew towards him. Alus somehow managed to block it, but as more and more power was fed into it, Alus's feet incrementally sunk. The sleeves of his clothes exploded and his arms dropped, unable to bear the blow.

However, Alus didn't panic. Even though all of his joints were in pain, his expression didn't waver for a moment.

«Cocytus»

Frost and a pale blue light covered Alus's right hand. Alus turned his right hand around towards Dante. In it was a spell that would send anyone into a world of absolute zero. However, his hand never reached Dante. He'd flown into the air and avoided being touched.

As was befitting of a power capable of perfectly freezing anything, using Cocytus came with a price. Alus's arm turned pale from the frostbite and fell limp. It had already been broken from blocking Dante's blow. Since he couldn't use it anyways, he figured he might as well use Cocytus.

Having escaped Alus's clutches, Dante spoke up. "Your dominant arm is useless, and Minerva has adapted to me."

Dante reversed gravity, stopping in midair and looked down at Alus. He raised his hand, and stones of all sizes floated up.

"What about it? I still have one more arm." Alus held Night Mist with his left

hand, pulled the chain, and levitated.

“Then try to block it. Try to keep up until I can extract all of Minerva’s power,” said Dante.

The rocks fell towards Alus at high speeds. Each of them was accelerated by gravity and imbued with unique mana. The first rock hit, kicking up a cloud of dust, and after that a seemingly infinite number of them rained down like bullets.

Finally, a giant boulder flew towards the cloud. Its size and speed made it resemble a meteor, and it would crush anything in its path.

As the boulder hit the ground, a ray of light shot out from it, splitting it in half and grazing Dante’s cheek. It was a blow from Alus. The boulder shattered into fragments that scattered across the ground.

As the cloud of dust was blown away with the wind, Dante looked down to see Alus standing without a scratch.

“No way... Shit, is that the Sword of Damocles?!” said Dante.

The Night Mist in Alus’s left hand had transformed into a pitch-black long sword. But it was too large to be an ordinary long sword, and black flames clung to its blade. There were several spells that imitated swords, but this was the highest rank of them all; it was on a mythical level.

Black mist flowed from one of Alus’s eyes. It was both a mist and a liquid. A black drop of the mist fell down the ground, and mist rose up from that spot too.

“So it showed up after all... I didn’t want to use this,” Alus bitterly murmured. The manifestation seemed to have happened automatically, without his will. It was a power that touched upon Gra Eater. Not only could he not control it, it also came with a time limit.

Two different kinds of mana existed within Alus. The first was Alus’s original mana; the other was the mana of his special ability. Since it was reliant on Alus, he had the ability to control it. If he handed over the control to the power, he’d lose the ability to restrain it as he had with the Demi Azur incident.

This spell in particular was created to see if he could use the mana for anything other than Gra Eater.

Of course, it was practically impossible to control a massive spell construct at the same time as his special ability. But after Vanalis, Gra Eater seemed to have assimilated more tightly with him.

It had become easier to handle and control.



In order to use his special ability for magic, Alus needed to rely mostly on its mana. Because of that, the switch was always on hand.

That was the switch he flipped whenever doing work in the shadows. He sank his consciousness deep below. In the darkness where he could see nothing, he disposed of his emotions and optimized himself for fighting.

Those depths were probably where his other mana rested. Right now he felt like he could understand that the darkness was Gra Eater itself. But regardless, he couldn't use his special ability to its fullest in this darkness.

Alus suddenly thrust his black sword into the ground. His surroundings began to warp and then filled the area behind him.

Normally, elaborate copies of Night Mist would appear from there. It was the sign for Oboro Hien, an attribute-less spell that created an infinite array of swords. But this time, it wasn't the usual short sword but long black swords. Affected by the Sword of Damocles, the spell had become something else.

«*Senkenkokuyou*»

The expelled swords were all covered with the same black mist as what flowed from Alus's eye.

"As if I'll let you! «*Last Carmalum*»" said Dante.

The black swords flew towards Dante flying high in the sky, and in the next moment, he unleashed a wave of gravity over a wide area. The heavy force that was exerted over everything, including the mana information body itself, distorted even the scenery.

The black swords struggled against the gravity, like fish trying to swim upstream, but they wouldn't last long. At least that's what Dante speculated.

No, it was absolute conviction based on the understanding of magic.

And yet...

Like a king giving orders to an army, Alus raised his arms. When he did, the black swords picked up momentum, easily brushing off the domain of gravity and reaching Dante's body. The blades pushed into his body and pierced the flesh.

The swarm of swords ripped deeply into Dante's flanks and shaved the flesh off his shoulder. A particularly dark light reached out towards his center. The impact shook his body.

While he'd managed to throw it off its trajectory, it still pierced his shoulder, causing him to grunt and slump over slightly.

Sticky blood dripped from his mouth and oozed from all of his wounds. It ran down his legs and formed a red pool on the ground.

Alus didn't even blink as he stared coldly. As if reflecting his coldness, the spell also stopped, leaving Dante crucified in the air.

"Why isn't my power working?!" Dante asked through pants. He struggled to at least pull out the sword piercing his shoulder. But the moment he touched it, his palm burned and a finger was blown away.

"Ugh! Fuck! Damocles...if Minerva could fully adapt to me, I could...! Fuck!" Dante spat out with bloodshot eyes. But in the next moment, he showed an ominous smile and his palm squirmed.

A black sphere of compressed mana formed in his hand. It started off as small as a fist, but then started rapidly growing. Minerva, hidden behind Dante, seemed to be letting out a scream as the space distorted and an overwhelming amount of heat was generated.



It was now clear what was happening and where he was hiding it. The amount of information being processed in an instant was beyond the capacity of the system. Not even when seven people had used it simultaneously during the demonstration had it generated this much heat.

Yet as Minerva gave off a strange roar, the white smoke stopped, and the device faded into space again. It had finished reading and processing Dante's next spell.

"So Minerva finally adapted. Took it long enough..." he said.

The light in Dante's eyes was being drawn to the sphere of gravity at his palm. Now that it had grown, Alus could tell that it was a mysterious sphere of gravity, but what was inside it was a mystery.

The supercompressed mana and vast amount of information was chaotically shaking the very space inside the sphere. The ability to compress mana to this level and fit it inside a small space was likely due to Dante's unique attribute. Only someone with outstanding affinity for gravity manipulation could create such a supergravity sphere containing a storm within.

In the next moment, the sphere of gravity disappeared from Alus's view. Alus hurriedly looked up, far above Dante's body.

The sphere had left his hand and was flying rapidly, a distorted spider web of a sphere appeared in the air around the sphere of gravity. It was now so large that it could fit an entire city.

Alus stared at it with his mouth shut, sensing the coming disaster. It would eventually become a symbol of destruction and cover the surface.

The light in Dante's eyes now that Minerva's powers had fully adapted to him convinced him of that. While they were on the outskirts of Alpha, Alus worried about how far the impact would reach with the added gravity from the fall.

As Alus was thinking about that, there was a change in the airflow, as pebbles of all sorts were sucked up into the sky. Perhaps interpreting Alus standing still as him being in a stupor, Dante triumphantly spoke the spell name.

⟨*Diurnal Dogma*⟩

It began to fall and picked up speed. Even if he avoided a direct hit, everything would get caught up in the supergravity once the giant sphere was released. Any living creature caught in that would be crushed to death. Be it trees or rocks, anything would be crushed, leaving behind only specks of dust.

Dante looked down as if to witness Alus's last moment. The outer shell of Diurnal Dogma was falling down on Alus. It was a glimpse of the disaster the supergravity would cause.

"You can run if you want," Dante taunted him.

However, the black sphere was already so close that avoiding it would be impossible.

"Don't make me laugh," Alus whispered softly. In the next moment, Diurnal Dogma was split in half. The two halves of the black sphere slid away from each other and broke.

The web of gravity spread out like a blooming flower...but a beat later the web of gravity stopped moving. A strange rift opened in the space cut by the Sword of Damocles, like a giant beast opening its eyes. Something black appeared to be stirring within, and in the next moment, Diurnal Dogma was rapidly absorbed into the rift.

The damage that the slash inflicted on the space was far greater than Dimension Thrust, and its impact was incomparable. Before long, the calamity that Dante had unleashed had been fully absorbed, and the rift closed. The remnants of the black mist that had appeared in the last moment danced like a snake before disappearing.

The same mist came from Alus's eye, and he quickly shut it.

"Wh-What did you do...?" Dante shook his head as if rejecting reality.

The Sword of Damocles was closely related to Alus's special ability. It was the act of transforming Gra Eater's power into magic. Being able to use attribute-less magic was also because of Gra Eater's influence and why Alus had two different kinds of mana.

Alus had the mana he was originally born with, as well as mana absorbed from others. He had reached a point where he could use two sources

independently of one another.

Typically, he would use his own mana and resupply it with the mana that Gra Eater absorbed. He took advantage of it, in fact. But when he used Gra Eater, the essence of the mana he used changed. He stepped into the realm of his special ability.

It was an irregular situation, but it allowed for certain magic to be used. Rather than using Gra Eater, which he didn't fully understand and couldn't fully control, there were situations where it was better to construct spells with the human side even if it used up more mana.

He fired the last sword from his attack and pierced Dante's stomach.

I can't really let him go any further, thought Alus. Raising his arm, the spell disappeared and Dante's body was freed.

Dante fell a long distance and hit the ground without even attempting to break the fall. Alus held his right hand and walked up to Dante.

"What did you even want to do?" A question suddenly left Alus's mouth.

Dante raised his gaze slightly and gave Alus a dry smile, spitting out the blood in his mouth. "I had...some business...at the end...of the world."

"The end of the world... What are you talking about? Do you mean that spell that was the embodiment of calamity?" asked Alus.

"N-Nah, I mean...th-the literal end...of the world... Its edge," said Dante.

"The end of the world? Is paradise supposed to be there or something? Besides, you... No, where could foreign objects like us even go than this cramped human realm? What a ridiculous fantasy," said Alus.

Dante smiled more deeply. "W-We'll see... Well, I'll die either way. But before I go, how did you find out...about the description, about Minerva...? Th-That's not something so easy to d-decipher..."

But Alus had glimpsed into the Akashic Records. If not for that, it would have taken a long time. But there was still one sentence that he hadn't been able to unravel. It was a completely unknown language.

"Who knows. You can think about what the answer might be in hell," Alus

said bluntly, prompting a final triumphant look from Dante.

“Tsk, h-hell, is it...b-but paradise...really does...” Dante weakly raised his arm above his head...pointing in a clear direction. Not towards the Inner World but towards the edge of the Outer World. In that instant, an association flashed through Alus’s mind.

The Four Books of Fegel, Minerva’s secret, the extraordinary knowledge Dante had, and the outside world he was talking about. Dante’s fearless smile might just have been trying to ridicule Alus one last time, but Alus threw curt words at him in return.

“So those are your final words after everything you’ve done. Sorry that I won’t believe you, besides nothing was as surprising as my students’ growth.”

Dante grinned. He seemed to come to an understanding about the black mist from Alus’s closed eye...and then he died, finished off by the Sword of Damocles piercing his chest. His body was absorbed into space, or perhaps into the sword itself.

After that, Alus readied his sword once more.

“So it won’t come out right away. Maybe he just wanted to annoy me, but I’m not going to go along with it,” he said.

A cut in space appeared, revealing Minerva. It fell to the ground with a heavy thud, as if representing the fall of an ambition. With Dante’s death and Minerva retrieved, Alus’s mission was complete.

If all this did was protect Sisty’s job, then it wasn’t worth the effort...but it was still better than having the Institute run by someone else. If that were to happen, the Institute would probably be a lot more inflexible than it was now.

With the loss of its master, Minerva sat silently on the ground, not making a sound or leaking any mana. If left there, nobody would have thought that the AWR was humanity’s greatest treasure.

Alus suddenly thought of connecting and accessing Minerva. For a moment, its functions seemed to be damaged, but it finally floated up in the air as if it had gained a will of its own. But he had no idea how Dante had been able to control its power to such a degree.

It would have been nice if the book had a hint, but it was unclear if there was any mention of it in the book Alus had. Even if there were, he was unsure if he'd be able to decipher it better than Dante had. Still, it had been a disappointment to see the oldest AWR fall into the hands of a magical criminal and be used as a source of mana.

If Dante is to be believed, it's supposedly a core... But I'll hold off on confirming that now. I'll leave it for later, thought Alus.

At any rate, as Alus stared at the AWR floating in the air, he was just glad he wouldn't need to physically carry it back.

Loki joined up with him afterwards, and judging from her triumphant look, he figured she'd properly handled her new spell. Even Alus was a little surprised by that. The magic formula had only been hastily engraved into the AWR, and while the theory was sound, there hadn't been a guarantee it would work in practice. He would have preferred to take more time to try it out and work out any kinks.

Well, I can't really blame her when I'm the one who engraved the magic formula, Alus thought to himself.

Regardless, it was true that Loki had an affinity for the Vertex of Thunder, too much of an affinity even. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they were a perfect match.

For the time being, he decided to wait until later to confirm her progress in more detail. Instead, he put his hand on her head to praise her. But with his right hand broken, he had to pat her silver hair with his left.

Loki looked pleased, but worry suddenly took over. "Sir Alus, is your arm and eye okay?"

"Yeah, probably. Although I'm not even sure what's going on with my eye," he responded.

Loki's expression further clouded over at his answer. She asked him to bend down, and while Alus didn't think it was that serious, she pulled at him with more force than he'd expected.

He had no choice but to get down on his knee, and as soon as he did, Loki

peered at him. She used her thumb and index finger to pry open his eyelid, and her face reflected clearly in his eye.

It was fine. He could see her face and her eyes without any difficulties.

“G-Good! It looks like it’ll be fine!” she said.

“So it seems. There’s no problem with my vision either,” he said.

“Yes! I’m glad,” Loki said, moving her fingers away and pulling Alus’s hand. She’d only just completed a difficult mission, but she was in refreshingly high spirits. Then it occurred to her. “Would you like to pour some water over yourself?” she casually asked.

“It’s not like I do that all the time,” he said.

For some reason, Loki knew about Alus’s little ritual after finishing a mission in the Outer World. It was his custom when he finished a mission to wash the grime away from his body and the dirt from his eyes. At those times, he felt the vast Outer World welcoming even his tiny existence. Feeling the gateway to a boundless world opening its gates to him, Alus felt the weight lift from his body and mind. But it wasn’t like he was troubled by not doing it.

“There’s no water,” he said.

“There’s a small river over there,” said Loki.

That was his first time hearing that, but even if that was the case, he had no intention of going. “I’ll just catch a cold if I get drenched in water in this season.”

“Ah, I suppose so. I’m sorry. It was just a joke,” Loki cheerfully jested, and Alus responded by poking her forehead.

She seemed overjoyed even by that, so Alus looked up at the sky with a sigh. “Still...it was a pretty rough mission.”

“Yes, but I knew that you would be able to complete it without problems, Sir Alus!” Loki innocently replied.

“No, it was full of problems. And there will probably be even more up ahead,” he said.

“It will be fine. You can overcome any predicament. And by your leave, I will accompany you!” Loki said with an almost disgusting amount of optimism.

Alus shrugged in exasperation, putting his hand on her head once more as a show of his appreciation.

Afterword

Hello, it has been a while. Izushiro here. Thank you very much for picking up this book.

We have finally been able to bring you *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan* volume 15.

This volume follows the previous one in the escaped prisoners' arc (not that there is a subtitle), and I believe I was able to draw a good outline of the world that Alus and the others are active in... Well, there are still some parts that are vague, but I hope to get to the truth of the world in due course.

For those of you who read the afterword first, this volume features battle after battle.

It's like the dam holding it all back burst. Battles are easy to write, and it gets exciting!

I hope to eventually get to a time where Tesfia and Alice get a chance to shine. I would like them to get stronger quickly. That said, they are already exceeding the level of students. Which perhaps means that it won't be long before they leave Alus's side. I hope you look forward to their future moving on as well.

As for Loki, her growth has been considerable too. Tesfia and Alice are excellent in their own right, but Loki stands apart from the average student.

But that aside, volume 15 is quite extensive in terms of content, and I hope you enjoy it.

Finally, I would like to move on to my usual thanks.

I give my heartfelt thanks to my editor, as well as everyone involved in the process of publication, printing, distribution, and binding.

And thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria. Thank you so much for the beautiful illustrations despite the busy schedule, as well as for handling my

many unreasonable requests, such as Felinella's new outfit. I look forward to working with you in the future too.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you readers who picked up this book. The number of volumes should be enough to fill up a shelf by now, and I appreciate your support all this way.

Alus's and the others' world will continue to expand, so I hope you will accompany me for this continuing journey.



THE GREATEST
MAGICMASTER'S
RETIREMENT
PLAN

15



Mir Ostayka

A highly skilled female magical criminal who follows Dante. Contrary to her alluring appearance, she is very brutal.

Dante

The leader of the escaped criminals. He acts as a tyrannical king with extraordinary powers, and he assaults the institute with unbridled ambition.

Felinella Socalent

Alus's beautiful and talented senior who is also student council president. She also serves as an active-duty Magicmaster, helping her father out with his duties.

Alus Reigin

The genius current rank 1 and world's greatest Magicmaster. Normally he leads a peaceful life in the institute, but can that continue...?



The dress was finally completed, revealing a flawless and pure white wedding dress.

However, the magic dress was ultimately just the embodiment of Felinella's deep subconscious desire.

Bonus Short Story

A Strange Daily Routine

Most students of the Second Magical Institute—about ninety percent—spend all three years living in the dorm. The female student who'd recently transferred in was no exception.

Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan was waking up to a nice and sunny morning in her dorm room. Incidentally, she had slept on her chest with her face turned to the side. The small drool stain on her pillow was a part of her charm.

Rooms were typically shared between two students, but because of her mission, she'd been specially granted a room of her own. She had no complaints about the size, but when it came to choosing a room, there was one point Lilisha refused to give in on: the amount of sunlight the room received. It was of the utmost importance, and without it her mornings would be ruined. Everyone had their own strange habits, and sunbathing was hers.

As she awoke, the sunlight leaked through the curtains, reflecting off her golden hair and dazzling her as she yawned. She then stretched and got out of bed. She rubbed her eyes and went to take a quick shower. Next, she performed some simple skin care, fixed her hair, and brushed her teeth.

She put on her gown and stepped out of the shower room, heading straight for the large window. It was so big that it went from floor to ceiling, and the surface of the curtains faintly glowed in the light. Lilisha narrowed her eyes and spread the curtains open. As she bathed in the light she took off her gown, which slid off her shoulders and fell to the floor. Then she just let the sunlight shine on her. At the same time, she exhaled. Her pale skin shone with a golden glow as if she was wearing light itself.

She was quite literally sunbathing.

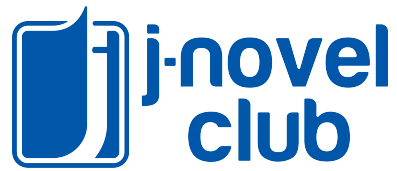
"Ahh, it feels so good...!"

Indeed, Lilisha's strange daily routine was sunbathing completely naked. However, she was no longer in her family home, but in the dorm, and she was fully exposed to anyone who would happen to look inside. Considering that she was on the second floor, she was at a good height for the public eye to see. But Lilisha, who was almost in some form of trance with her eyes closed, showed no signs of being perturbed.

She felt freedom in her nakedness, and the natural light on her body felt good. With those factors she could feel not only the mana flowing in her body, but even her qi.

This had been Lilisha's daily routine ever since she'd lived at her family home. Neither the maids nor even the chief servant—who was very strict on etiquette—interfered with her routine. Which was why she wouldn't stop, even in a dorm.

"It's strange that even the artificial sun feels this good," Lilisha murmured in satisfaction as she stretched again in the nude. It was hard to tell if she lacked any common sense or if she was just doing things at her own pace... At any rate, the eccentric noble girl was off to a good start on her day.



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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 15

by Izushiro

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